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Toru Toba
Illustration Ealmaro
The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt
(Hey, How About Treason?)

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(Hey, How About Treason?)
Toru Toba
Illustration Falmaro

"Seems we're going to shake on this with a smile, just like last time, Lady Blundell."
"I'm honored I could help foster a new friendship between our nations, Prince Regent."
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This is all I can say with certainty on the matter. A tough opponent...

...plus three Imperial princes already onstage.

But—

VICTORY WILL BE MINE, OF COURSE. OBVIOUSLY.

I imagine Wein must know I'm going to do this.

The real battle is starting now.

However—

He didn't seem like he belonged in the Imperial Palace, which was at the center of the Empire.
"Princess Falanya, do you understand the difference between a person and a citizen?"
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Imperial Prime Minister
Keskinel

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Toru Toba
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YEN ON
New York

Copyright

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Toru Toba

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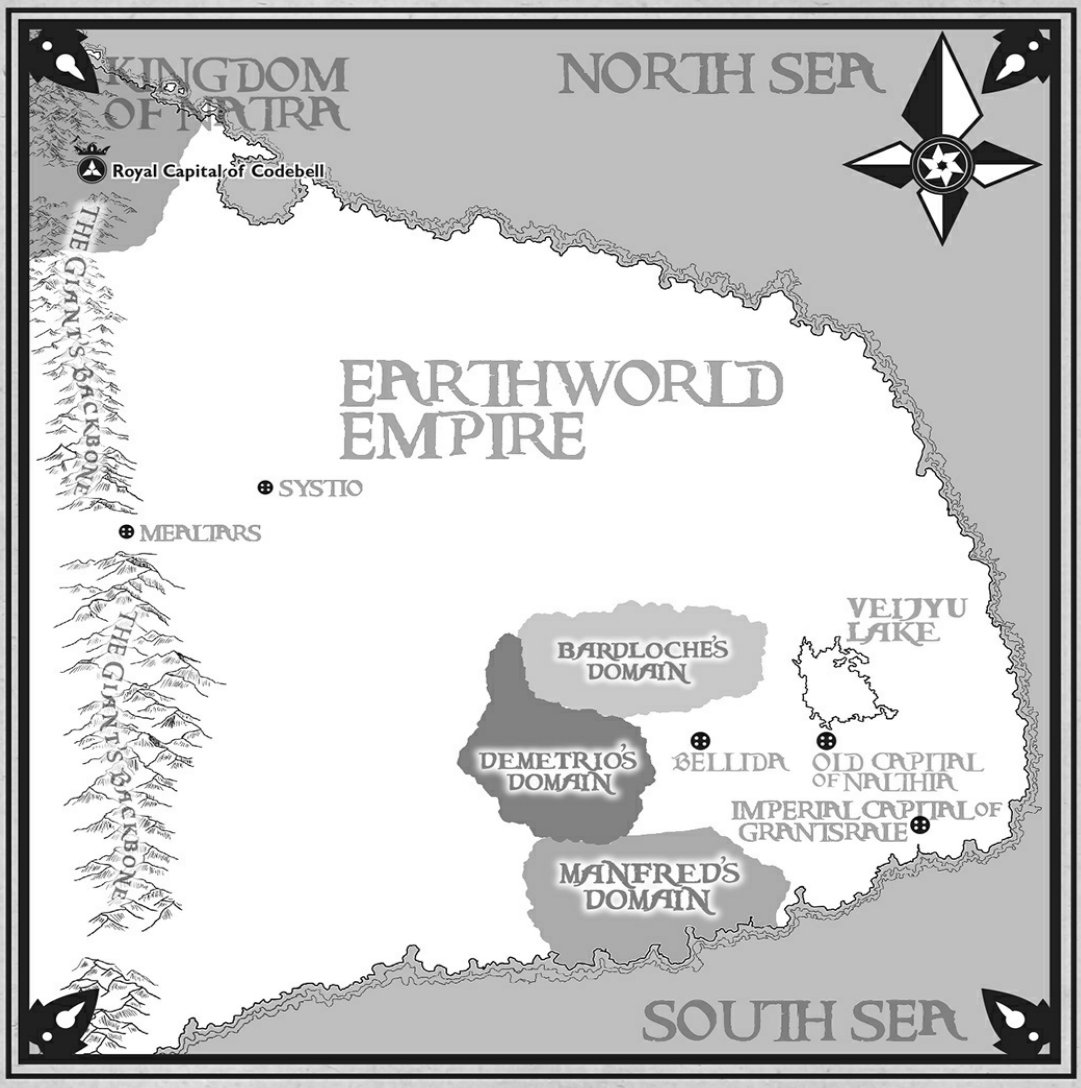
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Chapter 1 | Hey, How About Calling the Imperial Capital?

Grantsrale. The Imperial Capital of the Earthworld Empire.

Located right next to Veijyu Lake, the largest body of water on the continent, was the city that served as the capital, symbol of Earthworld, which was known for uniting the Eastern continent.

The Empire had conquered other countries, making it a melting pot of people and cultures. The capital was a perfect example of this: diverse in race and languages, mismatched in architecture. It was a busy city; nothing was polished about it.

Those from the West might wince at this graceless cityscape, seeing how deeply rooted they were in tradition. However, those with even a little bit of perspective wouldn't be able to stop themselves from shivering in fear.

The Empire had been on a path to expanding its territory for only a few decades. And they were far from being done, though they'd already united the Eastern continent. In other words, the Empire could one day strike again.

Earthworld, the Eastern ruler, was an insatiable dragon, going through a growth spurt—

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In a corner of the capital was a small restaurant called Quintet. Off the main road, the hole in the wall enjoyed decent business from the locals.

The capital was the heart of the Empire. It drew in citizens from all its lands. Running a business there was no small task. If the owner of Quintet was keeping the restaurant afloat in this dog-eat-dog world, it spoke volumes of his skills in the kitchen.

Quintet was busy as always—but not exactly in its usual way. The second floor had been closed off to the public, reserved for the day.

“Someone important here, owner?” asked one of the customers.

“Basically. So be on your best behavior,” he replied, not trying to be needlessly polite.

“C’mon. You couldn’t find politer patrons if you tried.”

“Maybe when you’re sober.”

The customers burst into laughter and moved on to the next topic. They couldn’t care less if someone had reserved the floor above them, and anyone who knew the owner’s skill wouldn’t be surprised to hear a person of status was dropping by Quintet.

Well, if they had a chance to actually see who was above them, they would instantly be rendered slack-jawed…for there was Lowellmina Earthworld, the Second Imperial Princess of the Earthworld Empire, with a listless look on her face.

“…Phew.”

Lowellmina was a beautiful girl, to say the least.

Glowing golden locks. Clear blue eyes. Everything down to her fingertips was polished. Even if you didn’t know who she was, a single glance would tell you she was born into status.

As her face clouded over and she slumped in her chair, it didn’t take away from her beauty. In fact, it gave her an ethereal, mysterious air. However—

“I’m stuffed…”

If anyone found out that overeating was the cause of her listlessness, that illusion would come tumbling down like wooden blocks.

“Urgh… What’s wrong with me…?”

“Your brain, I believe, Princess Lowellmina,” pointed out Lowellmina’s attendant, Fyshe Blundell. She looked at the princess with utter exasperation as Lowellmina cradled her face in her hands, a plate full of food in front of her. “You should have known you wouldn’t be able to finish all of this.”

“Oh, here it comes. Wisecrackers just love to say, ‘I told you so’—judging and criticizing everyone else in hindsight, getting up on their high horses. You should have stopped me if you’re going to chew me out now!”

“I tried. But I seem to remember someone insisting, ‘Excuse you?! My stomach has never been better! This is nothing!’”

“……” Lowellmina looked away.

“Your Highness.”

“Okay! This conversation is over! I don’t remember saying that, so we

can drop the subject! Let's focus on something more…constructive. How about a bite to eat, Fyshe?"

"I'm afraid I don't remember offering to be your backup stomach when I vowed loyalty to you, Your Highness."

"Ouch… So this is what it feels like to be betrayed by your vassal…! My heart feels like it's torn into two…!"

"That would be your stomach."

"Stomach, heart, they're both in my chest! Same difference!"

"Sure." Fyshe sighed, sitting down. "This will be the first and last time, Princess. I'm not a big eater, you know."

"I knew you'd come around, Fyshe! A loyal retainer is a blessing! Oh, if you're going to eat, I suppose I can order some cake for dessert. How many do you want?"

"……"

"Hm? Is something the matter? You look like you're staring at a pig that refuses to learn from past mistakes. It's like your eyes tell me everything: 'Oh, she's hopeless. I guess there's no harm in being kind to her until she's ready for slaughter.'"

"Don't worry. You're not imagining things."

Lowellmina cocked her head. *What's that supposed to mean?*

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Ignoring her master, Fyshe tucked into her meal. Several minutes later, the two had polished off the plates.

"Ah…I can't. I've eaten enough for three days. I can't eat another bite. I'm going to become a cow." Lowellmina slouched in her chair.

"But we managed. I imagine you don't have room for cake?" Fyshe asked.

"Oh. I do."

"…Didn't you just say you ate enough for three days?"

"But it's technically only one meal."

It made no sense, but it seemed Lowellmina wanted cake.

The princess seemed prideful. "Soljest might be in the culinary hall of fame, but it doesn't even compare to the Empire. You know, their cakes are so good. Fluffy sponge made from flour, egg yolks, and precious sugar, decorated with jam and seasonal fruits! It looks so sweet and divine."

"Right, this isn't your first time here, is it?"

"Yeah. I used to come here when I was at the military academy. They can only make so many cakes a day, so we always fought over who would get to eat one."

Lowellmina got a distant, nostalgic look in her eye.

As the Imperial princess, she could call the chef to the palace instead of visiting the establishment herself. She could take a single bite and throw the rest out.

She would do no such thing, however.

…So this was a place she frequented with classmates, huh?

That explained why Lowellmina had insisted on visiting, ordering mountains of food, polishing off her plates, and reminiscing about old friends. It was easy to brush it off as mere sentimentality, but Fyshe did no such thing. She offered a gentle smile.

"Hee-hee, you seem interested in cake, too, Fyshe."

"…You're right, Your Highness." Fyshe nodded as her master confused her smile for curiosity.

After that, they ate cake, savoring its sweet scent and texture, and sat through the ensuing pain. They couldn't eat another bite.

"—Well," Fyshe said after she took a breath, "what are your thoughts on the city so far?"

"Very typical of the capital. Busy and alive…at least on the surface."

Lowellmina might have chosen this shop out of nostalgia, but she had

other reasons for stepping out of the castle. By seeing the city for herself, she could feel out its vibe.

"I knew the Empire is becoming plagued with disease," stated the princess.

As someone who had lived in the Imperial Capital for many years, Lowellmina could sense an ominous heat swirling with its usual energy.

"…It has already been three years since the passing of His Majesty the Emperor. Even the Empire is starting to tire."

"I know this wouldn't have happened if my father had been in good heath."

Zeruch Earthworld. Lowellmina's father and the Emperor of Earthworld.

He had been their respected leader, beloved by the people and possessed of the right skills to rule the country. That was exactly why his death had devastated the country in unpredictable ways.

The Emperor served the role of energizing the nation with enthusiasm, vitality, and spirit. Without this guidance, the Empire was burning away as if it were afflicted by a horrible fever.

"Things might have been different if he had named a successor," Lowellmina bemoaned.

Zeruch had three sons.

Demetrio, the eldest, had the support of the oldest noble lines.

Then there was the second son, Bardloche, who was backed by the military.

Manfred, the youngest, was endorsed by new money.

All were of the proper age to ascend to the throne. None had met their father's expectations, however. Zeruch knew what made a fine ruler, which was why he couldn't hand the reins over to sons who'd failed to meet his expectations. And then he passed away without ever naming a successor, inciting a battle for the throne among the three princes. In the end, the Emperor had marred his own illustrious career.

Three years since his passing, the fight for succession was still not over. The Empire was squandering time, stirring with an energy that had no outlet.

"…The irony," Lowellmina said. "To stabilize things, one of my brothers should ascend to the throne as soon as possible, but this instability works in my favor if I'm just thinking about myself."

Lowellmina was currently the head of her own group known as the Patriot Faction, a collection of people worried about the future of the Empire.

Its members sympathized with Lowellmina's desire to remain neutral and resolve this ongoing fight without letting her brothers stoop to using military force.

Well, that was how it appeared on the surface.

Only those in her inner circle knew about her real intentions: to reign over her homeland as Empress. Forming the faction was part of her plan to whittle away the authority of the princes and create her own path to succession.

"…You have a seemingly far-fetched wish for a woman to ascend to the throne. To make it happen, we won't just need your quick wit. It'll be necessary to build momentum."

In this era, there was no real precedent for women showing their acumen in the political sphere. Not to mention there had never been an Empress before. And Lowellmina was going to walk down this thorny path.

The princess would have to outrun the princes struggling to keep up the race to the throne and convince her faction that she wanted justice for all, even if she didn't believe a thing that came out of her mouth. Fyshe knew these things had to happen.

"Our current instability wasn't willed by you, Your Highness. I don't think you should feel bad for using this opportunity to your advantage."

"…I know. At the moment…"

Their conversation was cut short. They were hearing something new: a commotion breaking out among the customers downstairs. The men were engaged in a heated conversation on just about everything, but one particular topic piqued Lowellmina's interest.

"Oh yeah. Did you hear Prince Demetrio is finally going to be in his new position?"

"Yeah. I heard there was going to be a coronation ceremony."

"Finally. We can all take a break from this madness."

"But I think the other princes will fight back."

"…Do you think there will be a civil war?"

"I dunno… I honestly don't care who the Emperor is by this point. I just want someone on the throne."

That last comment was heartbreaking. Lowellmina drew her attention away from their conversation and sighed.

"I knew it. Rumors of a coronation are spreading."

"It was announced high and low, after all."

The coronation ceremony. The formal event to crown the new Emperor was carried out by someone with a claim to the throne. Once it was done, the new ruler would be recognized as Emperor both domestically and abroad.

Just the other day, Prince Demetrio had announced this ceremony was in the works.

"The citizens must feel like it's been a long time coming," Fyshe mused.

Two full years had passed since the Emperor's death. They were in the middle of their third year without a leader. Lowellmina could tell people were starting to get impatient.

The Empire was still going strong, but there were hints of rebellion in its territory. Nations in the West were waiting for their moment to strike.

No one knew how long this period of peace could last with an empty throne, and every citizen hoped political stability would come as soon as possible.

"But his ascension will pose problems for me."

If Prince Demetrio became Emperor, Lowellmina would have to give up her dream. However, there was no way she would just accept defeat lying down.

And so she would take action. Nothing had happened so far, because that was the way she'd wanted it. But things were going to be different from now on. For her own sake, she was going to have to go against the people's wishes.

"…The irony," Lowellmina repeated before looking at her attendant. "Well, Fyshe? How are the plans for Wein's visit coming along?"

The crown prince of Natra, Wein Salema Arbalest.

They had history. Known throughout the continent, the prince was planning to visit the capital to aid her with the coronation ceremony.

"About that. We just received a message. It said—"

Lowellmina looked up at the ceiling as she listened to Fyshe's report.

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"Hrm…" groaned Demetrio, the eldest prince of the Earthworld Empire.

He was in a room in the city of Bellida. Of course, the perimeter of the building was stationed with guards, as was the rest of Bellida. In fact, the whole city had become his personal garrison.

"Your Highness, I have reports from our spies on the middle prince."

“Our potential ally, Lord Enshio, will be arriving tomorrow.”

“The other factions are moving faster than anticipated. We should act without delay—”

“But the soldiers are getting tired. Right now, we should—”

In front of Demetrio, vassals were exchanging reports and opinions at lightning speed. They had one goal: to put Demetrio on the throne.

That was why they were currently leading the troops toward their destination.

—However…

“Mmgh…” Demetrio was having a hard time focusing, even though they were in the middle of something crucial.

He wasn’t alone. The vassals seemed to steal glances at the corner of the room, even as they engaged in heated debate.

So what was there in the corner?

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

There was someone flashing a blinding smile.

“Don’t mind me. Go on. Continue.”

…Wein Salema Arbalest.

The prince of Natra was in the room, for whatever reason.

Demetrio and his vassals were united in their thoughts: *Why is* he *here?*

Wein thought the same thing. *Why am I here?*

The curtain was rising for the newest chapter of our tale, tangled up in a web of conflicting goals and drawn by unintended scenarios. Sparked by Prince Demetrio’s coronation announcement, this incident would be known in history books to come, labeled as the following:

A New Era for the Earthworld Empire—

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Rewind time to when a certain custom was taking place in Willeron Palace in the Kingdom of Natra.

"—So you must be the new assignments."

Speaking magnanimously from the head of the table was Crown Prince Wein Salema Arbalest. His assistant, Ninym Ralei, stood at attention by his side. They gazed upon the two men now kneeling before Wein.

"You may greet His Royal Highness," Ninym prompted.

One of the men responded nervously. "I am Clovis, the newest member of the esteemed palace guard. It's an honor and privilege for me to stand before the countenance of His Royal Highness…!"

Clovis let out a quiet sigh, relieved he didn't falter.

The man next to him began his own introduction. "I-I will be researching f-farming methods, and… My apologies! M-my name is S-Salomon…!"

You idiot, Clovis thought, face paling.

Salomon grew white as a sheet and bowed deeply. After all, he'd just messed up his introduction to the person essentially leading the country.

Wein, however, spoke in a gentle voice to put them at ease.

"I've already heard about you, Salomon. You've done agricultural research in Cavarin, correct? I read several of your reports… An investigation on the damaging effects of repeated cultivation on arid land and how to rectify the harm early on. I found it quite fascinating."

"Th-thank you…!" Salomon trembled, either from nerves or happiness.

Wein turned to the man next to him. "Clovis, aren't you the younger brother of one of our soldiers, Karlmann?"

"Huh? Do you know my brother…?!" Clovis jolted. Karlmann was a common soldier. Clovis never dreamed the crown prince would ever remember his name.

“He fought in the war against Marden back when I first became regent. How could I ever forget? I’m thrilled to see his younger brother has been compelled to join us.”

“I…I…I have no words…!” Tears welled up in his eyes, overcome with emotion.

Wein nodded at the two men. “People are the foundation of a nation. Especially now, when we’re progressing so rapidly. I look forward to your service.”

““Y-yes!””

No other politician to walk this planet was so great. Clovis and Salomon thought it was fate that they were blessed with an opportunity to serve him, as they bowed.

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“—Ha! Hook, line, sinker!”

“Um…” Ninym sighed.

As soon as the audience was over, a mischievous smile had broken out across Wein’s face.

“Sheesh. To think you were an honorable ruler just moments ago.”

“My magnanimity is expensive stuff. I gotta use it sparingly,” Wein replied with a shrug and smile. “Another raging success! I love this ‘More Loyalty Meet-and-Greet’ plan!”

Wein had established several customs since becoming regent. One of them was an interview with Wein for prospective employees, regardless of job or rank. Recruitment itself was handled by the head of Human Resources, and the interview with Wein wouldn’t change their employment status, as long as it wasn’t a total flop.

As for why this custom existed in the first place—

“We have to protect our brand as the royal family! By talking to them, I can satisfy their desire for my approval and make them feel like they belong! Nothing like a loyal heart to shackle a vassal!”

So it was all part of a performance.

“You know, most people wouldn’t dare say that out loud, Wein,” Ninym said, offering her candid advice, but she couldn’t argue with the outcome.

Royal families were often cut off from the public. At best, people could hope to catch a distant glance at the royalty during ceremonies and festivals.

Vassals working in the palace might have more opportunities to see the royal family, but only the highest in rank would be able to exchange words with them.

Hence this interview. Speaking to Wein, who was as close to a god as a mortal could be, was an emotional experience that motivated the masses.

"It's not *just* to boost the vassals' morale. It's also a chance for me to memorize all my staff. I'm killing two birds with one stone."

"Your memory remains amazing…"

"Of course. And I should put my skills to use, instead of wasting them, eh?"

Wein had been born with an excellent memory. Anyone who could remember almost every name in their army of several thousand was no average person. Including full-time and part-time staff, a few hundred people were working at the palace. Compared to his troops, it was nothing. Except Wein also remembered very specific details about his employees, down to their hometowns and their personal history.

"I'm pretty sure I can promise other royal families aren't doing the same thing."

"Well, I just don't get why they don't," Wein said with a shrug. "The palace is the heart of a nation and our home. It's like they don't care if strangers are running around all over the place."

Wein was right. The palace was the core of the nation. The royal family lived there, and other people of status stayed there on occasion. It housed treasures and national secrets. Obviously, that meant its employees needed to be upright citizens with perfect track records. They couldn't have suspicious characters lurking around the place.

Of course, Wein couldn't patrol its grounds, even though he could remember faces. But if he knew exactly who set foot in the palace, it might come in handy in an emergency. At least, that was his theory anyway.

"It's not that they don't care," Ninym explained. "They just can't remember all their employees. And you claim you can memorize several thousand of them? Must be some kind of kink."

"It's not! I use a simple trick!"

"What trick?"

"I just record their face, name, physique, voice, and mannerisms in my mental Rolodex! Anyone can remember a few hundred people that way!"

"So it *is* a kink."

“Gah,” Wein groaned at his vassal’s harsh appraisal.

Ninym continued, “Even if other royalty *could* remember all their staff, I doubt many would try. I mean, they’ll need time in addition to a good memory.”

“I get it. We’ve seen a surge in these meetings recently. Any more, and it’s going be hard to find the time.”

“I wouldn’t have believed you if you told me this months ago. To think so many people would want to serve Natra.”

The Kingdom of Natra used to be a triple threat in the worst way: no money, no human capital, and no resources.

But now? They’d won wars and come to possess new territory, a gold mine, and an ice-free port. Wein’s reputation was on the rise, too. It was like the iced-over signboard marking that the kingdom had thawed, attracting those interested in making names for themselves.

“Plus, we secured a deal to trade with Patura in the tropical South. And they threw in something to sweeten the deal: its sailors and manufacturing techniques. I see more people on the horizon.”

“You know, we practically wrestled this out of their hands.”

“But we both agreed to the terms, so we’re good!” Wein insisted, claiming he hadn’t done anything wrong.

Ninym had on a wry smile. “Suuure. In any event, Natra is on the up-and-up.”

Wein nodded. “Definitely. We’ve got more funds, people, and resources! I’m on top of the world! I have nothing to fear! Our administration is just getting started! And they all lived happily ever after!”

“—It would be nice if things wrapped up so nicely.” Ninym suddenly produced three letters. “We have to think about how to handle these.”

“We sure as hell do!” Wein looked at the letters and clawed at his head.

These letters were from Prince Demetrio, Prince Bardloche, and Prince Manfred, all related to the coronation ceremony that Prince Demetrio had announced the other day.

“It’s no easy task. Who would have thought he would announce that out of the blue?”

“Guess they’re really backed into a corner,” Wein assumed.

Wein was aware that Demetrio’s faction was crumbling, out of the three Imperial princes vying for the throne. The incident in Mealtars had been the catalyst, so Wein wasn’t exactly uninvolved.

Despite this, the eldest prince had suddenly announced a coronation ceremony. This was only supposed to happen once he'd settled things with the other princes. It was going to raise a few eyebrows if he deviated off course, but Demetrio must have realized the only way to remain in the race for the throne was to steamroll his way through it, seeing that his power was waning.

This plan involved the letter now in Wein's possession. Its contents were simple. It was an invitation to attend the upcoming ceremony.

"Demetrio is just that kind of guy. He still sends me this damn thing, even when he's not over what happened in Mealtars."

"He has either reflected on his actions or doesn't care what other people think of him."

He must have also sent invitations to other influential foreign leaders. Attending the coronation ceremony would mean accepting Demetrio as Emperor. The more attendants, the more it secured his authority on a global scale. The prince was going to use this to legitimize his position as Emperor and make a comeback.

"And the other two letters are from the other princes," Ninym said, holding up the envelopes.

Their contents were very similar. In essence, they proposed forming an alliance to keep an eye on Demetrio, so Wein wouldn't be tricked by the eldest prince's antics.

"So they want to keep tabs on me. A totally different approach from Demetrio, it seems."

"I imagine the princes think they can handle Prince Demetrio on their own, so they're trying to limit any foreign powers from interfering with their plans. I mean, especially if you stepped in the ring—no one would know what would happen."

"Hey. You make me sound like bad news."

"I know." Ninym ignored Wein yowling that she was so mean. "Basically, if we join forces with Prince Demetrio, we'd be ahead of the game in establishing friendly terms with the next Emperor. If we take the initiative in this difficult situation and embrace the eldest prince as the next ruler, he'll owe us when he ascends to the throne."

"*If* he becomes Emperor," Wein interrupted. "Demetrio took one final gamble with this announcement. It would be amazing if everyone accepted his invite, but if no one shows up to his coronation? Well, everyone in the

Empire will know he's got no one backing him and no right to the throne. And there's no coming back from that."

"You have a point. And if you join forces with him, you'll become the enemy of the other two princes. So if the eldest prince fails to become Emperor, all we'll have to show for our efforts is the ire of their new ruler. That's a major disadvantage."

"Which I'd love to avoid, if nothing else." Wein groaned.

Ninym gave him a fleeting glance. "The disadvantage of accepting the requests made by the younger princes is that Prince Demetrio will hate us. And if he becomes their new ruler, we'll become his enemy. I guess if we accept their request, though, it'll give us the chance to observe things in the Empire from a distance and allocate our resources elsewhere."

"I'm being worked to the bone these days. Maybe I should just sit back and enjoy the show."

"Or maybe I should bury you in a mountain of work."

"Ninym! What do you think I am? A miracle worker?"

"No. A pack mule."

"So I'm not even human to you…?!"

Ninym assured him it was a joke. "To be honest, I think doing nothing is an option. Joining hands with Demetrio would only end poorly."

"No kidding."

Allegedly, Prince Demetrio had lost half of the supporters in his faction, compared to its peak membership. In the past, the power behind the three factions had been evenly distributed, so it was a tragic fall from power. It was reckless that he was going up against the other princes by attempting to pull off this coronation ceremony.

"—Still," Wein said, "it's too early for us to come up with a plan."

Ninym was in agreement. "Not all the cards are on the table yet."

Prince Demetrio. Prince Bardloche. Prince Manfred.

Wein and Ninym knew there was someone else working in secret in the fight for the throne.

"—Pardon me." Someone had knocked. An officer stuck his head through the door. "An emissary of Princess Lowellmina's has just arrived."

Wein and Ninym exchanged looks and nodded.

"I'll be right there," called out the prince.

The official retreated, and Wein stood up. "Seems our missing card has exquisite timing."

“What will Lowa do?”

“Well, I know she’s not about to sit back and watch the show.”

They’d have their answer soon enough. Ninym and Wein headed to where the emissary was waiting for them.

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“It’s been a while, Prince Regent.”

Seated before them was none other than Lowellmina’s attendant, Fyshe Blundell.

“I’ve heard you’ve been breaking ground not only in the East and West, but the Southern Sea as well, Your Highness. From human to human, I’m constantly impressed by your competence. I pray for your continued success from the bottom of my heart.”

Wein nodded after Fyshe gave her formal greeting.

“I’m glad to see you in good health, too, Lady Blundell. You’ve made the trip many times, but I imagine it never gets easier. We’ve prepared for your arrival, so I hope you rest after our meeting.”

“I appreciate your hospitality.”

Fyshe smiled at him, and Wein smiled back—not because they had to do so to seem polite. These were genuine. Memories of days past resurfaced in their minds.

“Come to think of it, it’s been two years since our first encounter, Prince.”

“That long ago, huh?”

They had met right as Wein took up the position of regent. It had been totally unexpected, but a necessity when King Owen fell ill. His first order of business had been a meeting with Fyshe, an Imperial ambassador at the time.

“Things sure have changed, haven’t they?” Wein asked.

“Yes. If you told me about the current situation with Natra or my job, I don’t think I would have believed you.”

“It’s been some time since you started serving Princess Lowellmina… I’m curious. What do you think of her, Lady Blundell?”

“She’s wonderful, of course,” Fyshe answered honestly without a moment’s hesitation. “You know I, too, was once in a role deemed unfit for a woman, as an ambassador. I was told I was accomplished, but I think spending time by Her Highness’s side had made me realize what real

accomplishment is."

"You think highly of her. I've only seen her twice since I became regent, but it seems like she just keeps getting better and better."

"Precisely. I think you can say her position and current situation are perfect to let her shine." Fyshe broke into a tiny smile and then placed a finger to her lips to indicate this was just between them. "Of course, she's only human. So she does have her cute moments. She recently made a fuss over her outfit."

"Yeah? I'm listening."

"Unfortunately, I can't say any more."

Ninym listened to their conversation from behind.

I see, she thought. Of course, this was just Fyshe's personal opinion of Lowellmina, so it wasn't fact…but at the very least, it seemed they had established a solid relationship. And Lowellmina had sent her prized subordinate to this remote location.

There has to be a deeper meaning behind this, Wein, Ninym said with her eyes.

I know, Wein replied silently.

Lowellmina had played a very important hand here. She must have thought she had something to gain, and she planned to walk away with it.

"—So I hear you have a message from Princess Lowellmina."

When Wein broached this topic, the air seemed to freeze over. It marked the end of their relaxed reception. The real discussion was right about to begin.

"I imagine you're aware that Prince Demetrio of the Earthworld Empire has declared a coronation ceremony will take place," Fyshe started, correcting her posture. "Princess Lowellmina has insisted for some time that the fight for succession could be solved through discussion. This announcement, however, was made without consulting the other two princes."

"I bet Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred are fighting it, huh?"

"I'm afraid so. All three princes are getting ready to mobilize their troops. Lowellmina is fearful that war might break out between them, after we've managed to avoid it for all this time."

I doubt she's actually afraid, Wein thought, but he kept it to himself.

Fyshe looked at him. "It's evident that the princes will start a civil war for their own sakes, without considering the fate of the Empire. To resolve

this as soon as possible, I've come to request your aid."

"I see…"

Honestly, it wasn't what Wein had been expecting. He was under the impression that Lowellmina would try to stop him from meddling in their affairs, like the other two princes had done. Never in a million years would he have thought she would disapprove of her brothers' behavior and demand Wein's aid.

I did think she might ask for my help…but not to stop chaos from breaking out. That can't be the whole story.

The truth was, they had assumed the real fight would come *after* Demetrio's coronation.

After all, it was inevitable that Demetrio would fail. Even if he used all the resources at his disposal, everyone knew his coronation wouldn't go as planned, and he would be forced to leave the political sphere for good.

The problem was what came next. Without their leader, Demetrio's faction would be pawns for the taking. Since the size of a faction correlated to its influence, they would be targeted by Bardloche, Manfred, and Lowellmina. It all came down to who would be the first one to seize them. That was the real fight.

...Lowa wouldn't want foreign entities to meddle in this either. Ninym was thinking things over behind Wein. *If she asks for help from the wrong person, they could invade the Empire at a later time. But if she's here to request aid, that means she has no other options…*

Or maybe her goal was something completely different.

Wein and Ninym tried to suss out Fyshe's expression, but a calm smile stayed plastered on her face. They couldn't get a good look into her real intentions.

"…What kind of help do you want exactly?" Wein asked, probing deeper.

Fyshe answered without missing a beat. "I imagine you're very busy. Of course, I understand that you work for the good of Natra, which is why we only have one request. We would be so pleased if you could declare your support for the princess, who wants to resolve this in a peaceful manner."

Ninym made mental notes. *So they don't want us to get* too *involved. Hence why they want us to "declare our support" in name alone.*

The support of Natra would have meant nothing back when Wein had just become regent. But things were different now. Fyshe was right. Natra

was only on center stage because of Wein's efforts. Now it would make a world of difference to have them supporting Lowellmina.

As a request, it's perfectly inoffensive, Ninym concluded.

—Wein sensed something was off, however. *It seems like too small a favor after traveling so far.*

He didn't imagine they would ask for his troops, but it just seemed anticlimactic, considering Lowellmina had played the best card at her disposal—Fyshe.

I feel like they're after something else…but I don't have enough to work off of to make a judgment call.

He knew he wouldn't get an answer, even if he racked his brain. So he switched gears.

It'll be high risk and high return if I join the eldest prince. If I wait things out with the other princes, it'll be no risk and no return. And if I support Lowellmina: low risk, low return.

Those were his three options. If only there was an option for no risk and high return. But of course, nothing that good ever happened in life.

Wein's and Fyshe's eyes met, gazes unwavering, hiding their intentions. They faced each other with expressions as calm as windless stretches of water.

For just how long did they sit in silence? The tension in the room was so thick, you could cut it with a knife.

Wein suddenly broke into a small smile. "I understand your request. If that's the case, I'd like to give my full support."

Fyshe beamed. "Thank you, Prince Regent! I'm certain Princess Lowellmina will be pleased by the news. I imagine her followers will feel the same!"

"I'm glad to hear it." Wein nodded. "But I wouldn't get too excited yet, Lady Blundell."

"Huh…? What do you mean?"

"I only said I'd *like* to give my full support. I never said I would."

"Wha—?" Fyshe's eyes widened. She immediately went on high alert.

Wein faced her. "I empathize with Princess Lowellmina's wishes to settle things peacefully, as the regent of an ally nation and a sensible human being. But I have very little information on the princess and her faction. So it got me thinking: Maybe Princess Lowellmina is only telling us what we want to hear, while intending to incite more chaos in the Empire."

“H-Her Highness would never…!” Fyshe almost leaped to her feet, but Wein raised a hand to stop her.

“Of course, I want to believe Princess Lowellmina is after peace. But history shows countless examples of ‘benevolent rulers’ who became tyrants over time, right?”

“Right, but…”

Lowellmina was asking Wein to invest in her because he believed in her. Wein was saying that he couldn’t do that, because he didn’t believe her. They were at a standstill.

Of course, Wein didn’t plan to halt negotiations. It was part of his strategy to turn her down at this stage to see how she would react.

Fyshe had expected Wein to try and shake her, so she made a show of thinking hard before speaking like she was making a big decision.

“If that is the case, please let me make one humble proposal.”

“I’m listening.”

“—Would you come see the princess in the Imperial Capital?”

“Hm?” Wein murmured.

Fyshe continued, “I understand your concerns, Prince Regent. I don’t think I can persuade you to believe the princess, no matter what I say here. Therefore, it’s my humble opinion that you should see and hear Her Highness for yourself.”

“Huh… I guess a conversation with her would be the quickest way of clearing my doubts.” Wein nodded before flashing her a grin. “And the rest of the world would interpret this meeting as proof that I’m taking Lowellmina’s side… Is that what you’re after, Lady Blundell?”

“Who can say? I can’t speak for the rest of the world.” Fyshe had on a brazen smile.

Wein observed her and seemed to be having fun with this. “Okay. If it’s no trouble, I guess I’ll be paying Princess Lowellmina a visit in the capital.”

“Ah…!” A smile broke out across Fyshe’s face. “Her Highness will be pleased by your visit, Prince Regent. I shall report to my homeland right away.”

“I’ll start preparing for departure as soon as we receive an answer… Seems we’re going to shake on this with a smile, just like last time, Lady Blundell.”

“As a citizen of the Empire, I’m honored I could help foster a new friendship between our nations, Prince Regent.”

Sure enough, Wein and Fyshe shook hands with smiles on their faces. This was the moment that it was decided that the prince of the Kingdom of Natra would be going to the Empire.

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"—Are you sure you're okay with this?" Ninym asked Wein in his office after their meeting with Fyshe. "You said so yourself, Wein. If we go there to meet her, we won't just be showing our support. We'll look like we're joining Lowa's faction."

"I'm not okay with it, but I had no choice," Wein said with a shrug. "It would be ideal if we could make the next Emperor owe us a big favor, so we could form an alliance with them."

It would really suck if Wein sided with the wrong person before this decision was made. The safest bet would be to step in after a new Emperor was already on the throne.

"But things aren't ever that simple," Ninym commented.

"Right. The Imperial princess doesn't want to owe any favors to other nations. More than that, they would hate to follow through on promises when they're Emperor."

It was obvious enough in the letters from the younger princes. They wanted to settle internal matters internally. There wasn't a single nation that didn't operate in this way.

"Demetrio's downfall is a given by this point," Wein said, "and I'm expecting the battle for the throne to kick into high gear. I didn't think there will be many opportunities for Natra to butt in before the new Emperor takes the throne, regardless of who wins."

"Which is why you're choosing Lowa."

Demetrio was out of the equation. Baldroche and Manfred were rejecting all outside interference. This process of elimination left him with Lowellmina.

"And are you okay backing Lowa as Empress?"

"I could always pretend to support her, find her weaknesses, and switch teams to join the younger princes."

"You're a crook."

"Please call me 'clever.'"

"Crookedly clever."

“Much better!”

“Is it…?” Ninym looked exhausted.

Wein ignored her. “I know my visit to the Imperial Capital will be interpreted as Natra joining Lowa’s cause. I really don’t know what’s going on in the Empire right now. I mean, it’s been ages since I’ve been there. I’ll choose who to really support after I check it out myself.”

“So you’re going to use this trip as a chance to investigate the Empire and its factions.”

“I can’t say how much snooping I’ll be able to do.” Wein crossed his arms with a wry smile. “After all, Natra has made a good name for itself since I’ve been regent. The Empire is going to be cautious. We’ve got to be as low-key as possible, even on our way there.”

“And this is Lowa we’re talking about. I’m guessing she’s already prepared a trap for you.”

Wein nodded. Lowellmina was ingenious and ambitious. She was a good friend of his, but that didn’t mean she’d show any reservation or mercy.

I still don’t know why the meeting felt so weird. Lowa’s real goal must be hiding behind my visit to the capital. An annoying friend I have, Wein thought. The princess was likely thinking the same thing.

“Whatever.” Wein released the tension in his shoulders. “If there’s a trap, I’ll just chew through it. Fortunately, the real battle begins once Demetrio is kicked out of the race. We have time.”

“Okay, but what if Prince Demetrio *does* win?”

“It’s not even worth thinking about that,” Wein said, brushing aside Ninym’s words of caution. “The only people on his team are slugs that missed their chance to jump ship and idiots who have no idea what’s happening. They might bolster their numbers, but none of them have the brains to get themselves out of the hole they’re in. Even if more of them joined his faction, they’d never make a comeback. And if they manage, I’ll eat a potato with my nose.”

“Oh, what a throwback.”

“Anyway, it’s impossible.”

Wein had to focus on the ensuing battle after Demetrio was out of the picture. How could he act in a way to get the best outcome for himself? Unlike Demetrio, the remaining three candidates and their factions couldn’t be discounted. This wouldn’t be an easy battle.

“—No matter what they’ve got in store for us, victory will be mine,”

Wein declared. “Bardloche, Manfred, Lowellmina. I should keep a close eye on all three of them while we watch Demetrio go down in flames.”

Wein broke into a knowing smile, confident in his good judgment.

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—And now, back to the present.

“I don’t think we ever imagined we’d land in the eldest prince’s camp when we set off for the Imperial Capital.”

“Why does this always haaaappen?!” Wein shrieked—loudly as humanly possible—cradling his head.

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Prince Wein’s delegation had met up with Demetrio’s army. News spread through all camps like wildfire.

“Are you kidding me?! Natra is siding with Demetrio?!”

Leader of the militant faction, Prince Bardloche jumped out of his chair when he heard the news.

“Are you sure there hasn’t been some kind of mistake?! I’d understand if it was Lowellmina, but *Demetrio*?!”

“I’ve checked multiple times, but it’s true. Prince Wein is stationed with Prince Demetrio in Bellida.”

This was coming from his loyal subordinate. Bardloche had to accept this, even though it seemed impossible.

He groaned. “Hrm… If we’re talking about the prince from Natra…I don’t think he’d be fooling around or joining Demetrio on a whim.”

“Yes. I imagine it’s some political move. What should we do, Your Highness?”

Bardloche agonized for a moment before speaking. “…We’ll proceed with our plans. But keep a close eye on Demetrio’s army.”

“Understood.”

Bardloche watched out of the corner of his eye as his subordinate left to carry out these orders.

The prince murmured to himself, “Just what is that man thinking…?”

“Just what is he thinking?” wondered Prince Manfred out loud, moaning in frustration.

Though he was the youngest son, he was backed by new money, giving him enough of a boost to compete on a level playing field with the other princes.

“He’s a strategist. I knew he’d be scheming something when Bardloche and I asked him to keep his involvement to a minimum. But I don’t get it. It’s such a gamble to join Demetrio.” Manfred looked next to him. “What do you think, Strang?”

He laid eyes upon a young man who looked the part of an officer, standing beside him. His name was Strang, and he was both Manfred’s confidant and Wein’s friend.

“I agree, Your Highness. An alliance with Prince Demetrio will bring some serious challenges. But if they overcome these difficulties, the bond between Prince Demetrio and Prince Wein will be unbreakable.”

“So this risk brings a high return. Are you saying he’s doing this because he’s confident of winning?”

“Yes. Prince Wein is not a fan of gambling. An outsider might think he’s making a reckless bet, but this must be calculated. He has a way of ensuring his success in minute detail.” After saying that, Strang shrugged. “But Prince Wein has always been plagued by a strange stroke of luck. He might have been forced to work with Prince Demetrio due to unforeseen circumstances.”

“Unforeseen circumstances? Like what?”

“My apologies. That’s all I know.”

“Hmph…” Manfred contemplated this, and eventually he seemed to shake something off. “Well, it doesn’t matter. After all, Natra has now openly antagonized me and Bardloche. If that’s how it has to be, we have no choice but to take him down.”

“I have no idea what that man is after…”

Prince Demetrio fretted in a dimly lit room. Though he lacked principle and talent, he was supported by the conservative aristocrats, as the eldest son in line for the throne.

“Do you really think he came here to be my ally?”

The loyal servant answered, “Yes. We cannot afford to let our guard

down, but I do believe his intention is to assist in your ascension to the throne."

"But he conspired against me with the other princes in Mealtars and knocked me down a few pegs. Why would he want to join me this late in the game?"

It was true that Demetrio sent a letter to Natra requesting an alliance, but neither he nor a single member of his faction believed the prince of Natra would ever agree to it. They'd assumed he'd either observe the situation or join hands with Lowellmina. Never would he have dreamed that the prince of Natra would jump onboard *Ship Demetrio*.

Obviously, Demetrio was ecstatic. But a little voice in his head nagged at him, wondering what the reasoning behind it was.

"Just a guess, but Prince Wein might see this as his only chance to repair his relationship with Your Highness. The late Emperor was the one to establish the alliance between Natra and the Empire. It makes sense that Prince Wein would support the eldest son to secure the status as an ally."

"Hm… So you're saying he isn't here to back me, but he's here to maintain ties with the Empire…?" Demetrio made a face. He was having a hard time following.

He crossed his arms. The subordinate faced his liege, a serious look on his face.

"…Call this a wild delusion, but I'm starting to think he might have planned the incidents at Mealtars for this very reason."

"What do you mean?"

"We all know that if you ascend to the throne with the support of other nations, you'll inevitably have to form ties with them. I mean, even our faction wouldn't have reached out to Natra if we weren't in such a tough spot."

"…So you're saying he sent me spiraling in Mealtars because he realized I would set my sights on the throne and ask foreign nations for their cooperation?!"

"It's only one possibility, of course, but…" The subordinate tried to insist it was just a theory, but Demetrio bought it.

After all, Wein had brought his small retinue to a faction on less than friendly terms with him. He would never do something so reckless unless he was sure he could take control of the situation.

"That monster…!"

Demetrio would have torn him limb from limb if he could. But doing so would mean losing the trust of the lords. Wein must have known that, too. Otherwise, he wouldn't come sauntering into this place like he owned it.

"…I won't let you steal the show," Demetrio spat. "You may be planning to siphon all our resources, but don't underestimate me. I'll tear you apart with my teeth…!"

"—I imagine all the factions are thinking something along those lines."

"It's all an unfortunate misunderstanding, I sweeeeeaaaar!" Wein shrieked, unable to bear it, in the room assigned to him. "All of it! You've got the wrong idea! This should have never happened!"

"I can't say I ever expected this either…" Ninym sighed next to him.

After their meeting with Fyshe, Lowellmina responded in the affirmative, and Wein was set to visit the Imperial Capital. The delegation immediately began preparing to set off for the Empire. If they were traveling to the West, they would have had to brush up on the culture and customs of the destination. But Natra was a longtime ally to the Empire. No such debrief was needed.

Preparations went smoothly, and the delegation was ready to depart with Wein as its representative. They were two days ahead of schedule and started off strong.

Wein and Lowellmina agreed that his visit and itinerary should be kept under wraps until he arrived in the capital. If Wein had announced he was coming over like old friends, other factions would stand in his way, considering the current climate in the Empire.

But this policy ended up backfiring. As the delegation approached the city of Bellida, they ran into a group of soldiers. When Wein saw them with the Imperial flag, he'd assumed Lowa had come to greet them.

When he saw another flag below it, however, his face paled.

It was Demetrio's. Which meant the soldiers in front of them belonged to the eldest prince, deployed to secure his position as Emperor.

By the time the delegation noticed this, it was too late. They found themselves instantly surrounded by troops, and their identities revealed. They had to meet Demetrio himself.

"—So what brings you here?"

If this had been before Demetrio announced he'd be taking the throne, Wein could have just said Lowellmina had invited him to the capital. But Demetrio was in the middle of his biggest gamble yet. If he found out a foreign prince was meeting up with a rival faction, it was possible he'd go on a murderous rampage.

So Wein could say only one thing.

"We're here to cooperate with you, Prince Demetrio—"

And that was the story of how Wein and his delegation got stationed with Demetrio's army in Bellida.

"Noooooooooo! Why do these things keep happening to meeee?!"

"And with the eldest prince of all people. This really sucks, to be honest…" Ninym sighed.

Things might have panned out differently if they had bumped into Prince Bardloche or Prince Manfred. Of course, they just *had* to run into Prince Demetrio, a sinking ship with a sealed fate according to Wein.

"If only I didn't let my guard down when I saw that Imperial flaaaag!"

Wein was stewing in his mood. He wasn't going to cheer up anytime soon.

...I can't leave him like this. Ninym understood why he would feel this way, however.

If time permitted, she would have let him writhe about until he got it out of his system, but they didn't have that luxury.

She was determined to serve her duty as vassal. "Wein, let's decide on a plan. What are we going to do?"

"I don't wanna think about it for the next six months! I'm hibernating!"

"You're not a bear."

"Well, I'm gonna be a bear, starting today! Grrr!"

"So this situation is way over our heads…"

Ninym was used to kicking Wein's butt into gear, but she couldn't remember the last time he'd been so stubborn. The accident had left an impact on him. He was out of his element.

"I hear you, Wein, but it was an honest mistake. All we can do now is work out a solution."

"—It was no mistake."

Wein's expression hardened, and Ninym's eyes went unfocused.

It was no mistake.

His face looked irritated. Bitter, almost. And…slightly amused.

“None of this was a coincidence. It was all planned out. That’s why it’s so annoying.”

Wein sounded sure of himself, which made Ninym more confused.

“Wait. What do you mean, Wein?”

“Someone was working behind the scenes to get me to run into Demetrio and join his team. And I walked right into their trap.” Wein looked up. “They got me good… I never expected such a bold move so late in the game,” he mumbled through gritted teeth.

Ninym wasn’t following. “Why would anyone…? First things first, *who* would do something like this?”

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“That’s obvious. There’s only one person who could pull this off. Someone who knows the travel route taken by our delegation, our schedule, and the factions’ locations in the Empire.”

“…You can’t possibly mean…”

Wein nodded. “Good one, Lowa. Her trap wasn’t waiting for us in the capital. Her trap was her invitation for us to visit her there—”

“The Kingdom of Natra has gotten too large,” Lowellmina said between sips of black tea in a room of the Imperial Palace. “Natra used to be an important public road connecting the East and West. Though we want to unite the entire continent, the Empire never laid a hand on it because we were on friendly terms and we knew we had enough power to conquer Natra at any time.”

Lowellmina continued, “But ever since Wein became regent, Natra has flourished, gained territory, and grown friendly with the West. Such circumstances don’t bode well for the Empire.”

“Though they aren’t on the same level as us when it comes to military power, I assume?” Fyshe asked from beside the princess.

“At the moment, yes,” Lowellmina replied without hesitation. “As long as Wein is in good health, I can only imagine Natra will continue to prosper. By the time I become Empress, there is a possibility that Wein will be reigning over the West.”

“That’s…”

One might laugh off the idea of a prince from a small kingdom ruling over half the continent one day, but Fyshe wasn’t about to laugh. In fact, she couldn’t bring herself to even smile. After all, she’d witnessed Wein working his magic firsthand.

“So you hatched this plan to shrink some of his power, huh—by forcing Prince Wein onto Prince Demetrio’s sinking ship.”

Wein had predicted Demetrio would drop out of the race and Bardloche, Manfred, and Lowellmina would fight for the former members of the eldest prince’s faction. But Lowellmina had thought a little farther ahead. She was certain she would lose this battle among the three remaining siblings.

Her main platform was that the inheritance issue should be resolved through words. To this end, she had no public army or open displays of force, unlike her brothers. If the younger two brothers were scrimmaging to win

over Demetrio's supporters, Lowellmina knew it would be hard for her to butt in. And she was certain Bardloche and Manfred would make use of their forces.

She'd been struck with a stroke of evil genius when considering this situation: to bring Wein and Demetrio together and make them go head-to-head with Bardloche and Manfred.

"Demetrio had no hope of winning against the other brothers on his own. But the outcome will be different if Wein is on his side."

"Demetrio and Wein versus Bardloche and Manfred… The losing side will sustain major casualties, obviously, but the victors will be dealt damage, too. I guess we're swooping in when all parties have exhausted themselves." Fyshe nodded in agreement. "But I do have one question about your strategy. Do you believe Prince Wein will really join Prince Demetrio's side?"

"He will." Lowellmina sounded so confident. "It's in Wein's nature. When life hands him losses, he always turns them into gains. When placed on a sinking ship, he'll try to steer it to the nearest harbor instead of jumping overboard."

Lowellmina had gotten acquainted with Wein's character during their days at the military academy. In her eyes, she was stating the obvious.

"And if he manages to avoid Prince Demetrio and reaches the capital safely?"

"Should that time come, I'll ask to become his fianc e again," Lowellmina replied with a grin. "His visit would indicate his allegiance to my faction, so I imagine Wein will think it's a good opportunity to deepen our relations. If I'm honest, it would be better if we married after I took the throne, but if I can put him on a leash, that would be enough of a benefit for me… Well, not that any of this will happen."

Lowellmina continued, "Fyshe. You suggested you don't know who will win, but I think I do."

"Who do you think will come out on top?"

"Wein will win." Her tone was heavy with conviction. As long as Demetrio had Wein, he would win. In her heart, the outcome of the battle was already decided. "My plan will be a success when Wein and Demetrio defeat Bardloche and Manfred without putting Demetrio on the throne."

After that happened, Lowellmina's next two goals were to absorb Demetrio's faction and destabilize the authority created by Wein. Of course, this wouldn't take Wein down, but she could impede his progress. She

wouldn't allow his kingdom to flourish more before she became Empress.

Obviously, these were challenging conditions to fulfill. In addition to taking down Bardloche and Manfred, Lowellmina would have to defeat Wein.

"He's a tough enemy to take down."

The scheme was laid, but she was up against Wein. He was a beast with strategy, both kind and cruel. She would have to make an enemy out of him, and she would have to win.

"No need to lose heart, Your Highness," Fyshe said, reading her master's mind. "We've made the first move. As we speak, the two parties must be confused. And Prince Wein and Prince Demetrio aren't even true allies yet. Even Prince Wein must have his hands tied."

Fyshe was right. Wein had been put aboard Demetrio's sinking ship, which limited his movements. He was in a tight spot, no doubt. Lowellmina's side had the advantage.

But there was a little voice in her mind, either fearful of Wein's shadow or—

"Excuse me!" A messenger burst in. "A delegation from Natra led by Princess Falanya has just arrived!"

""What——?!"" Lowellmina and Fyshe yelped in surprise.

"Falanya should be arriving in the capital right about now," Wein murmured.

He'd finally calmed down, either sick of complaining or just plain exhausted.

"That's the silver lining. I really didn't think we'd need backup," Ninym replied, thinking back to before they left Natra. "You had Princess Falanya follow us to the capital from a short distance behind… I thought you were just being too cautious. Did you know this was going to happen?"

"I would have run away if I had."

Well, yeah. Ninym grimaced.

"I did think they might send trouble our way. I mean, they were insistent that I come to the capital. Plus, the Empire is already in a volatile state with the fight for succession and all."

That was why Wein had played one of his cards—Falanya. If nothing happened to him, the siblings would get to Lowellmina's place together,

which would reinforce the closeness of their two nations.

But things *had* happened to him. Wein was now with Demetrio's faction, and Falanya was heading to Lowellmina's place alone.

"Lowa wants Demetrio to take down the representative of Natra—me—and damage our reputation. But if another member of the royal family—Falanya—visits her, we can show the world that Natra is interested in solving this in a sensible way, even if we did 'support' Demetrio."

"So the damage to our reputations will be minimal, even if we lose here."

"It won't fix the root of our problems, but it's the next best thing compared to doing nothing," Wein continued. "If Lowa goes along with my sneak attack, it'll be a whole different story."

I can't believe they would respond so fast…!

Princess Falanya had arrived in the Imperial Capital.

Fyshe couldn't conceal her surprise when she'd heard the report.

They wouldn't have come so quickly if Wein had requested for his sister to make her way to the palace after stumbling across Demetrio's army. Wein had to have sniffed out something about the princess's plan during the meeting in Natra.

It's all my fault… Fyshe thought. Maybe she'd given it away with her line of reasoning, her expressions, movements, tone of voice… Whatever the reason, it was evident the prince had perceived something. Fyshe bit her lip, vexed that Wein had bested her once again.

She turned to her master to apologize for her failure…and practically jumped out of her skin. After all, Lowellmina was smiling, even though she'd just been dealt a counterblow.

"You certainly know how to stir things up, Wein."

"'Stir things up'…?" Fyshe blinked, not following.

"He's sent Princess Falanya, hoping it will lessen the blow to Natra's reputation once he loses. His countermove is not for a victory but in anticipation of defeat. You might say he's taken a defensive measure."

Lowellmina went on, "Princess Falanya is a valuable player for Wein. Employing her means that he was on guard, but he couldn't suss out what we were planning. Fyshe, you need not worry that you failed. In fact, this works in our favor. Wein's been cornered by Demetrio, and we have an impressive

catch like Falanya. You've done well."

"Th-thank you! I don't deserve your praise."

"—However." Lowellmina had a glint in her eyes.

Fyshe's breath instinctively caught in her throat.

"Wein might change tactics to a more aggressive approach if I'm too greedy."

"Too greedy? What in the world do you…?"

"The two of them have claim to the throne in Natra. One candidate is with Demetrio, and the other, with me. If I win and Demetrio loses, Wein's power will wane. At the same time, it will bolster Princess Falanya. If she manages to do something here that's in the best interest of Natra, even more so… What do you think will happen if the two are on a level playing field?"

Fyshe understood what Lowellmina was trying to say.

"Don't tell me you're thinking of helping Princess Falanya succeed and incite a rivalry between them in Natra?!"

The tiny kingdom was united under Wein. He could travel abroad only because his country was so stable. But Wein was just a prince—not even a king.

What would happen if there was a faction behind Princess Falanya that made their kingdom less than stable?

"They might be on good terms, but they're royalty. A war between factions will break out if they're equally fit to rule Natra. Of course, the princess's supporters can't dream of taking down Wein without something substantial. But it might be enough to halt their progress."

"P-please wait. If Princess Falanya succeeds here and Prince Wein wins this battle…"

"The older brother will be owed a favor from the next Emperor, and the younger sister will return to her kingdom with something to show for herself. Natra will enjoy a metaphorical spring—and a long one, at that."

Fyshe audibly gulped.

Wein must have realized this. As Lowellmina had said, the prince had intentionally sent Falanya as part of his plan.

In other words, Wein was sending them the following message:

"Splendid job. I lost the first round. I'm in a pinch here. I miiiight lose at this rate. So—let's up the stakes."

How is he even human…?!

They had thought Wein would go on the defensive, since he'd been backed into a corner. He'd shown them exactly where to bite so he could catch them off guard and go for the jugular.

As Lowellmina had said earlier, he changed his losses into gains. It was absolute madness, but Fyshe knew someone like Prince Wein could pull it off.

"…I understand the situation. What do you plan to do, Your Highness?"

Fyshe already knew what her master's answer would be.

"I'll be as greedy as possible." Lowellmina grinned. "The fight for the throne will continue to accelerate. Natra won't have many chances to meddle with our affairs. If he wants to up the stakes, I won't let this opportunity escape."

"……"

I can see fire, Fyshe thought. In both Prince Wein and Princess Lowellmina. When two flames collided, one of them would swallow the other. All Fyshe could do as a vassal was to ensure that her master's flame burned bigger and brighter.

"Okay, Fyshe. Let's give a warm welcome to Princess Falanya. And please tell the others I've authorized you to pull together a list of information and some technical knowledge. We'll need to choose one that'll make an appropriate gift for Princess Falanya."

"Yes!" Fyshe nodded at her lady's orders.

...Well, Lowellmina thought about the dear friend who was with Demetrio. *I imagine Wein must know I'm going to do this.*

In fact, Wein was thinking, *Lowa will go along with my game, but this is all I can say with certainty on the matter.*

The real battle is starting now, Lowellmina thought.

A tough opponent, plus three Imperial princes already onstage, Wein mused.

However—

But—

—Victory will be mine, of course, Wein thought.

—*Victory will be mine, obviously*, Lowellmina believed.

The crown prince of Natra, Wein Salema Arbalest.

The Second Imperial Princess of the Earthworld Empire, Lowellmina Earthworld.

Behind the scenes of the blood feud among the Imperial princes, two tacticians were declaring a war that would never make it into the history books.

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"I'm so full…"

Falanya let her face relax, melting into happiness, taste buds satisfied, and grimacing in pain from her stretched stomach. The carriage gently swayed as it slowly made its way forward.

"You ate too much," replied her guard, Nanaki, dryly.

"But it would have been rude if I didn't indulge myself when they gave me such a fine welcome." Falanya pouted.

Until just a short while ago, she had been enjoying the hospitality of Princess Lowellmina in the Imperial Palace in the capital. In addition to a lavish meal at the banquet, there had been musical and cultural performances. It was a display of Imperial excellence. Falanya had been ready to stand her ground in the Empire, but this almost threw her off her center.

"The Empire is incredible. I mean, look at all these people in this city." Falanya looked out the carriage window to see people going about their day. The princess had previously visited Mealtars, a city in the middle of the continent, but it couldn't compare to the energy here.

Trade united Mealtars, but the Imperial Capital of Grantsrale didn't seem united under a single principle, other than complete madness.

But it has as much charm as Mealtars, strangely enough.

Something in the chaos spoke to her. Falanya could feel the city pulsing with energy.

Or maybe…it makes me realize Natra is in the boonies.

Mealtars and Grantsrale were two of the most prosperous cities on the continent. They made those of her beloved home seem, well, a bit shabby.

N-no! That's not true! The economy has been good since Wein became regent, and we've expanded our territory! Even our population has been on the rise!

Natra *had* seen great progress in the past several years. But it still didn't compare to the activity here. Falanya thought about this before asking the servant across from her a question.

"Hey, Nanaki, what do you think of this city?"

"It seems hard to guard."

She should have known he would give her an unemotional response.

"Come on. Anything else?"

"Seems like it has a lot of hiding spots."

"……" Falanya leaned forward and pinched Nanaki's cheek in protest.

"What was that for?"

"Nothing." Falanya gave no indication of stopping.

Nanaki guessed he must have touched a nerve. He knew she'd grow bored if he just let her get it out of her system, but he glanced out the window and spoke to her instead.

"…You should sit down."

"No. I'm punishing you for not saying what your master wants to hear."

"Save that for later… We're almost there."

No sooner had Nanaki said this than the carriage jolted. He caught Falanya as she lost her balance. "Myah!"

"Told you so."

"…Hmph." In his arms, Falanya averted her gaze. "Fine. I'll forgive you this time."

"Should I jump for joy?"

"No need. Let us be off." Falanya righted herself before following Nanaki out of the carriage.

This area was known as the Noble Quarter. All around them were mansions. Virtually no citizens roamed its streets.

And now, Falanya's delegation stood before one of those many estates.

"—We've been expecting you, Princess Falanya," someone called out.

Several people stood there waiting. At the forefront of these presumed servants was a man with a dignified air.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Silas. Princess Lowellmina has granted me the honor of entertaining you, Princess Falanya."

Lowellmina had arranged for Falanya to stay at this manor during her time in the Imperial Capital. This man called Silas had to be an aristocrat, and his estate his own. The delegation had originally booked rooms in the state guest house, but Lowellmina sent them here.

“Thank you for your warm welcome, Sir Silas.” Falanya bowed.

Silas smiled. “Such words are wasted on me. As a Flahm, I can think of no greater honor than greeting both Prince Wein and Princess Falanya at my residence.”

Wein had stayed with him while he attended school in the Empire undercover. They had a solid relationship only because Wein had protected Silas’s people. Lowellmina guessed it would be better for Falanya to stay here, seeing how she loved and respected her brother.

Falanya was thrilled about spending her trip in the very same mansion as Wein.

“During my stay, will you tell me all about my brother’s time here, Sir Silas?” Falanya asked, burning with curiosity.

Silas nodded. “But of course, Princess Falanya. Let us go inside. Such conversation may be too long to conduct while standing.”

Falanya became bashful. “My apologies. I’m getting a little ahead of myself.”

“Think nothing of it. It seems Your Highnesses get along well with each other. It brings me great happiness as a Flahm. Please, right this way.”

At Silas’s prompting, Falanya entered the building. Locked in her heart was a curiosity about her brother’s past and prayers for his well-being.

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“Let’s go over the basics,” Wein said, spreading a map across the table. “First, Demetrio’s goal is to become Emperor, and his siblings want to stop him. Some conditions must be met for one to sit on the throne.”

“First, they must be related to the Emperor by blood,” Ninym said. “Second, they must undergo a ritual baptism that ensures their ascension is accepted by the ancestral spirits. Last, the Emperor-to-be must announce a coronation ceremony that will be held before the public.”

Wein nodded. “The baptism takes place in the largest lake on the continent—Veijyu Lake, right by the city of Nalthia. After the upcoming Emperor is cleansed there, he and his followers head for the Imperial Capital of Grantsrale to the southeast.”

“When the previous Emperor was about to ascend to the throne, the masses allegedly assembled by the road, pushing their way to catch a glimpse of him as he traveled between the two cities.”

The journey from the old capital of Nalthia to the new one at Grantsrale took several days on horseback. This slow trip was meant to parade the new Emperor and show him to the masses.

"In that case, Demetrio has to make his way to Nalthia," Wein continued. "Which is why he mobilized his faction and left his territory."

Demetrio's territory was contained mostly to the west of Nalthia. In between the two cities was Bellida, where they were currently stationed. To the east was Nalthia.

"But isn't Nalthia occupied by Prince Bardloche?" Ninym placed a pawn over the territory.

After Demetrio announced that he intended to be Emperor, Bardloche acted quickly, rallying his forces to take Nalthia for himself.

Their march had been something out of this world. Bardloche's territory was adjacent to Demetrio's domain in the north. Everyone had assumed Bardloche wouldn't be able to organize his soldiers and reach Bellida before Demetrio. But instead of waiting for his troops to assemble, Bardloche had given orders to press forward to their target city, collecting his scattered soldiers en route.

That was how Bardloche reached Nalthia before the eldest prince, who took the normal approach of assembling his army before departure. Bardloche's method made sense only because his faction consisted of military personnel.

"Demetrio might consider skipping the baptism and speed-run it to the coronation ceremony in the capital. Except stationed there is Prince Manfred's army."

Wein took a pawn and placed it over Grantsrale. To the north of Demetrio's territory was Bardloche's domain. And Manfred's area was in the south. Though Manfred lagged behind his other brothers, he'd managed to mobilize his troops, too.

"At the moment, Demetrio and Bardloche have more soldiers," Wein said. "But it's only a matter of time before Manfred has an army big enough to rival them."

"If Prince Demetrio had dispatched some of his soldiers to the capital, they might have made it before the youngest prince arrived at Grantsrale."

But Demetrio had chosen to lead his troops to Nalthia first. After all, the baptism was critical to protect his legacy. Bardloche, however, had taken it first, and Manfred had mobilized his own army while Demetrio frantically

weighed his options.

"Okay, but Demetrio's faction is made of conservative aristocrats," Wein argued. "If they slight Imperial customs, that's as good as knocking aside the tradition of the eldest son taking the throne. They won't go back on tradition when it's part of the reason he can take the throne."

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Factions were such a bother. Sometimes they called for the leader to change his mind and bend to the faction's will, just so he could stay in command. Like Demetrio, Bardloche and Manfred must have had hard times wrangling in their respective factions.

"I wonder what Prince Demetrio intends on doing next," Ninym commented.

Good question, Wein thought as he looked up.

"Well, I guess he's got no choice but to battle it out with Bardloche."

"We should challenge Bardloche's army now!" shouted a young man participating in the meeting.

The room was packed with all kinds of people, young and old, all supporters of Demetrio's faction. Their leader sat at the head of the table.

"The longer we wait, the stronger Bardloche's defenses will become. He'll make a horrible enemy! Not to mention, Manfred is bolstering his troops. If we're careless, both armies might come for us!"

It was safe to say his assessment was on point. At all angles, it was obvious that Demetrio had made enemies of the two princes and that they were at a significant disadvantage, two against one. It made sense to take on one of the princes while the other was still preparing for battle.

"We just don't have enough manpower," an elderly man said cautiously. "Bardloche's army is strong. Until we're prepared and know we can win, I know it won't be pretty."

"You think we have time?! We've already placed our wager! We can't wait until we're certain of our victory! That'll never come! We won't win if we don't even try!"

"You need to reel it back. We still have allies who aren't here yet. It's not the right time to mobilize."

The other participants seemed to agree. These conservative members of Demetrio's faction were the cautious type.

"…Well? What do you think, Your Highness?!" The young man directed his attention to Demetrio, who had been sitting there in silence.

As all the aristocrats' eyes gathered on him, the prince spoke out. "… How many soldiers do we have at the moment?"

"About twelve thousand, Your Highness," someone nearby politely

replied.

"And those of my foolish brothers?"

"Our spies have reported Bardloche has just under ten thousand. It seems Manfred has around five thousand."

"Hmph…"

Based on numbers alone, his troops were the biggest, but even Demetrio knew that wouldn't secure his victory. Bardloche's army was strong enough to overcome this quantitative difference.

"And if we include our allies that we're expecting?"

"A little under twenty thousand. Of course, it will take time for them to arrive."

So almost double the size of Bardloche's army. It seemed ideal, but the issue of time made Demetrio groan.

"…Might I say something?" Someone at the far end of the table timidly raised a hand. "Perhaps we should ask Prince Wein's opinion…?"

The meeting room stirred. Everyone in the Empire knew about Wein's ingenuity, and all the participants thought he might give them something to work with.

Wein, however, was absent. There was one reason for this…

"—There's no need. He is accompanying us and no more," Demetrio dismissed. "I allowed him to sit in one time to figure out his intentions, but we don't know what he'll do if we give him a chance to butt into our plans."

"His Highness is right. We have new aristocrats interested in our cause with Wein as our ally. We've already reaped enough benefits from his reputation, even without relying on him."

"And this is a problem for the Empire. Now is not the time to invite other nations to step in."

All seemed unanimously wary of Wein. He was poison—a highly lethal one that even killed its administrator. They couldn't use him. They couldn't let Wein steal the show. They would keep him on hand, and no more. The aristocrats were convinced this was their best option.

"I have no objection to leaving Prince Wein alone," said the young man who had started the conversation. "But we must come to some sort of conclusion. Like, when should we make our move?"

The participants groaned. More soldiers mobilizing meant more time to organize them. How would they make it on time?

There was no right answer. Only future historians could know. They

didn't need a correct answer, but the confidence to decide and stick to a plan.

"—Fifteen thousand," Demetrio announced, making the judgment call. "As soon as we have fifteen thousand, we'll fight against Bardloche. If anyone has any objections, say so now."

A telling silence filled the room.

Demetrio nodded. "Then our plan is set. Prepare for battle."

""Yes!"" The vassals jumped into action.

Demetrio spoke quietly to no one in particular. "Mother…I promise to grant your wish…"

"—So, Wein, who do you think will win?"

"Hmm? Bardloche," Wein replied casually. "Even if Demetrio has double the soldiers, Bardloche is one hell of an enemy. Plus, he has the option to go on the defensive, waiting it out until Manfred strikes Demetrio from behind."

"Do you think the two have a secret arrangement?"

"Probably. Even if they don't have anything, Manfred has every reason to attack Demetrio from behind. I assume Demetrio has no hope of winning, as hard as he might try."

Wein had just ripped into the faction that he'd temporarily joined. Ninym thought he was finished, but it turned out he had more to say.

"But, you know, a victory or defeat won't necessarily end in a way that's favorable."

"…What do you mean?"

Wein gestured at the four pieces on the map in front of them. "We have four actors on our stage: Prince Demetrio, who announced he'd become Emperor; Prince Bardloche, defending the city hosting the ritual; Prince Manfred, amassing his army outside the city; Imperial Princess Lowellmina, scheming in the capital. —Who's making the mistake here, Ninym?"

Ninym thought about this question for a moment.

"Wouldn't it be Demetrio? He only made his announcement after being driven into a corner, and he has the other two princes on his heels…"

"Nope," Wein declared. "It's *Prince Bardloche* who's making the gravest errors."

"Prince Bardloche…?" Ninym blinked at him.

Wein sat back in his chair, which creaked. “So the race has begun. What would happen if someone who doesn’t want to win stands in front of the goal? You’ll get it soon enough. I guess all we can do until the battle begins is watch the proceedings.”

Wein broke into a smile and, with one finger, flicked away a pawn not on the map.

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Nalthia was absolutely crucial to the Empire. It was blessed with the largest lake on the continent, so it had flourished for centuries. It was also why the city was always targeted by its neighbors, handing it a history of repeated conflict.

But one man put a stop to that over one hundred years prior. He gathered people and weapons to liberate Nalthia from the nations controlling the region at the time. He didn’t stop there. He invaded and toppled the foreign enemies who tried to take Nalthia from him.

Once he had the entire region under his control, he declared the birth of the Earthworld Empire, reigning as its first Emperor and facing over one hundred battles during his life.

After his death, he was placed in a mausoleum in the suburbs of Nalthia, giving birth to the tradition of all succeeding Emperors being laid to rest in Nalthia. As Imperial territory expanded, they moved the capital to Grantsrale for more convenience. Nalthia still flourished, even up until the present day. It was both its first and its final territory.

“—I never thought we’d be here for this reason,” muttered Glen Markham to himself, walking along the pathway on the wall surrounding Nalthia.

He was Wein’s old schoolmate at the military academy. A member of Prince Bardloche’s army. He had helped secure Nalthia to prevent Prince Demetrio’s rise to Emperor.

“A mausoleum for generations of Emperors… I’ve always wanted to see it, but…”

If they could see the state of the Empire now, would they lament or be angry? Glen imagined they would not be happy.

The person he was looking for came into view.

“You were here, sir?”

An elderly man was staring beyond the castle parapet. He wore the same uniform as Glen and a dignified looked that belied his age.

Lorencio—an Imperial earl, Bardloche's former sword instructor, and currently close associate and leader of his former pupil's faction.

"Oh, Glen." Lorencio glanced over at him and pointed a wrinkly hand into the distance. "Do you know where this road leads?"

"Hm? Yes. It leads to the Imperial Capital, Grantsrale," Glen obediently answered the seemingly random question.

The road connecting the capital to Nalthia usually saw heavy foot traffic, but it was virtually empty at the moment. Everyone knew that, soon enough, this would be a battlefield hosting Demetrio and Bardloche's armies.

"…I was stationed here as a guard when the late Emperor rose to power," Lorencio said, reminiscing quietly. "Both sides of this road were packed. I could feel their energy. Food stalls were jammed, and it was difficult to find any lodging. I remember the candy I bought while on break. You know, it didn't taste very good, but it was like nothing I'd ever had before."

He went on. "At the end of the ceremonial baptism, His Majesty passed through those castle gates with his retinue, and the cheers were so loud, I thought we were experiencing an earthquake. As their cries washed over His Majesty, he seemed to glow…"

"I heard similar stories from my father. People wept, overcome with emotion, and cries for His Majesty could be heard even after sunset."

"Yes… That's why I'm so pained by our pathetic situation. Who thought his death would bring such tragedy?"

Glen could see the despair in Lorencio's eyes, thinking about their past glory and their bleak present. This downgrade must have pained him, like arid wind whistling through his heart.

It lasted only a moment. Lorencio gave a self-deprecating smile.

"…I've bored you long enough. Forgive me, Glen. These are just the ramblings of an old man."

"Not at all."

"Oh, you don't have to pretend. Anyway, did you have some business with me?"

"Yes. His Highness will be hosting a meeting to discuss the eldest prince's army."

"Understood. Let us be going."

Lorencio set off without hesitation, and Glen trailed behind him.

With Bardloche at the forefront, the faction leaders had already gathered in the room that Lorencio and Glen entered.

"I apologize for being late." Lorencio bowed.

Bardloche pardoned him. "Just sit down. I hate to rush things, but we need to start this meeting."

"Yes. —Glen, stay here and listen."

Glen nodded and went to stand beside the seated Lorencio. There were other young people in attendance, who weren't leaders, but eager hopefuls who might be supporting Bardloche in his future administration.

"How's the situation with Demetrio?"

One of the subordinates answered Bardloche. "According to our hidden operatives, he is focusing his energy on arranging his troops in Bellida. He has yet to make a move. His forces currently stand at twelve thousand. We estimate he will have around twenty thousand at most."

"That's a mighty big army. I thought his faction was losing people."

"It seems he accomplished this by threatening hostages and winning them over with money. He intends for this next battle to be a final one between the two of you."

"I guess even a cornered mouse will bare its fangs."

An army of twenty thousand was going to be hard to deal with, even if Bardloche's soldiers were top-notch.

"But maintaining an army of twenty thousand is no average feat. After all, Manfred presents a danger to him, too."

"Which means Demetrio might move before hitting full capacity… Keep an eye him so we don't miss a single thing." Bardloche grimaced. "And… what's going on with Prince Wein?"

For Bardloche, Wein was the biggest wild card. For better or worse, the middle prince had been around Demetrio long enough to have a good idea of what he'd do. He couldn't get a read on Wein, however, much less begin to imagine why he would join Demetrio.

"Prince Wein has not done anything conspicuous at the moment. It seems even Demetrio's faction is unsure of what to do with him."

"Hmm… Okay. Keep an eye on him, too."

"Yes, Your Highness!" The male subordinate bowed.

"Have we decided on a battlefront?"

"Yes. Please look at this map." A different man stepped in. "We've done a sweep of the surrounding area. For our respective troops, this plain outside

of Nalthia might be a good fit."

"So a battle on flat land."

"Yes. Nalthia would make a suboptimal fortress. And if we turn its sacred land into a battlefield, the citizens of the Empire will not be happy with us."

Other subordinates nodded in agreement.

"Even our presence in this city has been a point of contention. That strange prime minister is also outraged, I've heard."

"If we're not careful, we might look like a rogue army fighting against the Empire. Prince Manfred might devise such a scheme."

"Prince Demetrio doesn't want to see Nalthia engulfed in a sea of flames either, seeing that he wants to rush through the ceremonial baptism here. I believe he will agree upon the decided location."

Bardloche spoke up. "Is there any chance the citizens of Nalthia will interfere?"

"It's unlikely. They might be unhappy, but they don't support Prince Demetrio. They seem angry about the fact that we've stopped the ritual from proceeding, which is the same thing as snubbing our noses at their landmark feature."

It was like how Bardloche's faction of soldiers was proud of their military power and achievements. The people of Nalthia were proud of being born and raised on sacred ground.

Just then, one of the leaders chimed in with a smile.

"In that case, they won't have any grounds to complain if Prince Bardloche undergoes the ceremony."

"_____"

In that instant, the air in the meeting room felt off.

"That…is one possibility, but…"

A meek response. All the other leaders looked uncomfortable.

Bardloche broke the tension. "We're stationed here to uphold our moral duty to stop Demetrio and his attempts to become Emperor by force, leaving no room for discussion. Manfred is cooperating with us for that very reason. Let's not do anything reckless here."

Everyone else gulped in unison.

"Yes… Forgive me," apologized the leader, but the air remained heavy.

Bardloche sighed. "We'll stop here for today. You are dismissed."

They started to stream out of the room, including Glen, who had been

silently watching over the proceedings. Just as he was about to leave, however, he heard Bardloche murmur.

"Any more than this, and we'll be in trouble… I must hurry…"

What could that mean? Glen thought about it for a while, but it went unanswered in his mind.

Shortly after, Demetrio's army showed up on the outskirts of Nalthia. He had demanded that Bardloche's army withdraw from the city, but the middle prince refused.

This marked the beginning of the battle between Demetrio's fifteen thousand soldiers and Bardloche's nine thousand fighters.

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From the beginning of the struggle for succession until now, the three Imperial princes had done their best to avoid armed conflict. The reason for this was, of course, because they were brothers. They couldn't just kill each other. Well, that wasn't exactly right. They were more concerned about civil war breaking out and having to deal with intervention from the Western nations.

It was sensible, even when viewed in the most unfavorable of lights. They'd engaged in smaller skirmishes edging on the verge of conflict, of course. They'd mobilized armies to restrict one another's movements. The younger two princes had competed in Mealtars, but the three brothers had never fought head-on.

This was the day that would change. Prince Demetrio's and Prince Bardloche's armies were about to fight in a battle that could change everything.

"Move forward! Keep going! Eyes ahead! The enemy is just there!"

"Hold out! Knock 'em back! We can stop their advance if we just get through this!"

The battle took place on a plain, a distance away from Nalthia, just as planned. It lasted several days. A combined total of well over twenty thousand soldiers risked their lives, crossing swords and literally dyeing the ground red with their blood.

Fast-forward to the present…

On the battlefield were typical sights and sounds: pained screams, angry

shouts, clashing swords, footsteps, piles of corpses. It was in Bardloche's favor.

"Your Highness, Glen's unit has broken through the enemy's central defenses!"

"Send one of our reserves to follow him up from behind. Make sure the enemy doesn't fill the hole that we just ripped through with their soldiers. Use it as an opening for our men to rush in." Bardloche barked out his instructions from his stronghold in the rear. "How is the melee on our right flank going?"

"We've reorganized our battle formation and are pushing back the front line!"

"Send our remaining reserves to our right flank. Tell the left flank to focus on defense. We'll crush the enemy from the right before they decide to retreat."

"Understood!"

After he'd issued orders for a while longer, Bardloche looked at the man next to him. "Have we won, Lorencio?"

"I would warn against letting down your guard… But we're practically guaranteed victory, as Your Highness has said."

It wasn't wishful thinking. Demetrio's forces were larger at the start of the battle, but they were losing people at the hands of Bardloche's soldiers, who had undergone considerable training. At dawn on this day, they were matched one-to-one.

And now, Bardloche was overwhelming Demetrio on every front. The roles were undoubtedly reversing. There was no reason why he couldn't win this battle when he had the advantage in both soldiers and skill.

"I suppose my one concern is that man."

Flashing in Bardloche's mind was the image of the foreign prince in Demetrio's army: a man named Wein, the last person on the continent that anyone would disrespect.

"According to our reports, he has been far removed from the war council. He won't be able to speak up, even about his best strategies, so his efforts are all for naught. In fact, Demetrio's forces have done nothing beyond our expectations."

"Hmph…"

"If anything, Prince Wein might come here with a small army to launch a surprise attack on our stronghold. But the fortifications around Your

Highness are impregnable. Even if they attacked with several thousand men, we could hold out until reinforcements arrived."

Even the most fiendish tactician wouldn't be able to turn this battle around. This was Lorencio's conclusion. Bardloche was certain who would win and who would lose.

—But if that was true, why did he feel indescribably anxious?

"…We're dealing with Demetrio here. I won't feel this way once I haul him in front of me," Bardloche murmured, the haze in his heart clearing.

His troops would bring Demetrio to him—dead or alive. Then this would be settled.

At that exact moment…

"Hmm—?" He swore he heard the sound of a gong from the other side of the battlefield, followed by a round of cheers. His eyes widened.

A messenger came rushing toward him. "I have news! Demetrio's army has begun to retreat!"

"What?" Bardloche exited his tent and took a sweeping view of the battlefield. Just as the messenger reported, Demetrio's forces were indeed attempting to fall back.

"Your Highness, this is our chance to pursue them," Lorencio suggested.

Bardloche contemplated it for a few seconds and nodded. "Tell every commander: We'll attack from behind and break their spirit to keep fighting. But don't chase them too relentlessly. They're still Imperial citizens."

"Understood!" The messenger scrambled once again toward the battlefield.

Bardloche watched him out of the corner of his eye before glaring at Demetrio's retreating army.

"…So he ran before I could destroy his right flank."

"Is something bothering you?"

"The Demetrio I know refuses to admit mistakes or defeat. I thought he'd never retreat, even as the noose tightened around his own neck, but…"

"The eldest prince might be that way, but he must have some brilliant advisers. Either they gave him a stern warning or dragged him off the battlefield themselves."

Bardloche said nothing. They were the victors. His troops might manage to capture Demetrio. Even if the prince slipped away from their grasp, he wouldn't have many soldiers after sustaining such a blow.

Demetrio had asked for a decisive battle, and he'd lost. Any sort of

comeback was beyond all reality.

As Bardloche thought this, he felt something tugging at his heart. He felt like he could see a shadowy, unknown figure flickering in the corner of his eye.

"The units pursuing the prince shall return around nightfall. As soon as they come back, we'll make a formal declaration of our victory and tally our fruits of war."

"…Right." Bardloche nodded, trying to blow out the dark smoke filling in his chest.

In the end, his troops were unable to capture Demetrio.

Far from it, in fact. The core members of Demetrio's faction had all fled to safety. Based on their choice of escape route and obstacles left for Bardloche's men at critical junctures, it was as if Demetrio's army had planned on retreating since the very beginning.

Then—

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It was a tragic scene.

In some unknown corner of the forest, the injured and defeated survivors of Demetrio's army were assembled.

The sun had set. Darkness settled over them. Men made fires as small as possible to prevent their pursuers from detecting them, clustering around to steal what little warmth they provided. The smell of sweat and blood was thick. There was no sign that the stifled moans and tearful cries would stop anytime soon.

Demetrio's army had lost—destined to go down in history in the worst way. One could only guess how many soldiers had escaped Bardloche's army in pursuit. Only exhaustion and despair colored their faces.

"So," Wein started dramatically, taking this situation into account. "Do you feel like lending me an ear now, Prince Demetrio?"

Wein and Demetrio faced each other inside the only prepared tent.

"…I admit your plan allowed us a narrow retreat," Demetrio said, looking at Wein with an annoyed glare.

Back when Bardloche's forces had cornered them, Wein had whispered

to Demetrio:

"You can still escape if you go now."

Although hesitant, Demetrio chose to follow his advice. Using the escape route prepared by Wein, they were able to shake off their pursuers and flee to safety.

But that wasn't the reason why Demetrio had run away.

"So…can we actually win?"

Wein had whispered one more thing in his ear—that this wouldn't just save his life. He claimed Demetrio had a chance at victory by retreating here.

"Of course." Wein flashed a grin, illuminated by the flickering flames outside the tent, which made his shadow look devilish.

"Everything is already set. If a commander's job is to win, a politician's job is to turn losses into gains. Why don't we teach Prince Bardloche this lesson until he tells us he's had enough?"

Grantsrale. The Imperial Capital.

It had been some time after Falanya had arrived at Silas's mansion.

She was in unfamiliar territory. She must have been placed under his protection so they could monitor her. The vibe was different from her home, Willeron Palace.

Under these circumstances…

"Hoooooow cyuuuute!"

…Falanya was loving every minute of it.

"Look, Nanaki! Look! Aww! She's trying to walk! How precious!"

"…Uh-huh." Nanaki seemed bored by watching his master hop in joy.

The reason for her excitement sat right in front of them.

"Bah."

A human baby.

Not even a year old, the baby had a roly-poly body and a cloud of white hair. Her footsteps were unsteady. She was a walking bundle of joy.

"Over here, Elise."

"Awoo."

Elise was the baby's name. Using the wall for support, she toddled across the floor to where Falanya sat waiting. Elise pressed her hands on the princess's knees, stopping herself from tumbling over.

"Wow! You're such a good girl, Elise!" Falanya gave Elise a big hug and rubbed their cheeks together with enough force to fuse them.

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Falanya had fallen head over heels for the girl ever since she came to the mansion.

"You seem fond of Elise." A Flahm woman smiled as she watched the two.

Her name was Mirabelle—wife of Silas, who was the master of the house, and Elise's mother.

"Elise adores you just as much, Your Highness. As her mother, I'm delighted."

"Tee-hee. You really think so?"

"She's just flattering you, Falanya," Nanaki said.

Falanya went to give Nanaki next to her a good kick in the leg. He avoided it soundlessly.

"Hmph, you don't know what you're talking about, Nanaki. Elise and I are two peas in a pod." She smiled at the baby. Elise had on a puzzled look but replied by tracing her small hand along Falanya's face.

Suddenly, the baby frowned in the princess's arms.

"Wah…"

"What's wrong? …Oh, there's a weird smell."

Nanaki knew what the problem was. "She defecated."

"Defe… Wah!" Falanya jolted back—obviously careful not to drop Elise.

"Your Highness, I will take her." Mirabelle held out her arms with a giggle, and Falanya handed the baby over. With practiced hands, she undressed Elise and changed her diaper.

Falanya seemed to admire her dexterity. "Doesn't Elise have a wet nurse?"

"No. I'm responsible for her care."

Oh, Falanya thought with surprise. She was used to aristocrats who bragged about outsourcing their daily tasks as their natural-born right. It explained why many of them had wet nurses care for their babies.

Of course, there were aristocrats in rural areas who didn't have the same standards and those too poor to hire someone. But Mirabelle was a noble wife who resided in the Imperial Capital. If she was raising a child herself…

"I imagine you want to raise your child in your own way," Falanya concluded.

Mirabelle gave a small smile, which was unexpected.

"Hmm? Was I wrong?"

"No, pardon me. Your Highness's words have told me how the Flahm are

treated in Natra."

Falanya cocked her head to the side.

Mirabelle continued, "In the Empire, the Flahm are treated the same as every other race, but there are people who discriminate against us, though they say nothing about it. To be frank, very few people are willing to care for Flahm infants."

Falanya gasped. Now that she thought back on it, the staff in this mansion was surprisingly small for its size. Perhaps most balked at the idea of serving a Flahm.

"We're Flahm aristocrats, which means we're targets of jealousy and misguided hatred. I hesitate to trust Elise with someone under our employ, knowing they might feel the same way."

Mirabelle smiled for a moment as she rocked Elise.

"Grr…I see. The Empire hasn't completely changed."

Falanya pursed her lips. The Earthworld Empire was considered one of the most developed nations on the continent. She had been looking forward to her visit, and many things in the Imperial Capital were new to her, which made her even more upset that the material circumstances for this baby were less than what could be provided in Natra.

"Compared to the West, I can see that the Empire is more progressive. I heard the situation has improved slightly, but I've learned the Flahm have shaved their children's heads and gouged out their eyes to protect them from discrimination…"

Without their characteristic white hair and red eyes, the Flahm would look no different from others. But the children and parents must have shed many tears to achieve that end.

Falanya knew of similar stories, but hearing them directly from a Flahm broke her heart.

Mirabelle tried to raise her spirits. "Oh, we have no intention of doing that to our child. With strong hearts, we live as Flahm in the Empire." She stroked Elise's hair with a wry smile. "It's good that her hair is white. I don't know what I would have done if it were red."

"Red?"

"Do you not know about the famous legend passed down among the Flahm?"

It was the first Falanya had heard of it.

When she flashed Nanaki a questioning look, he nodded. "Once every

hundred years, a Flahm is born with flaming red hair, marking a hundred years of prosperity for its people…or so the legend goes."

"In the ancient language, 'Flahm' means 'glow' or 'glowing person.' It's said these leaders with red hair were given the honorary title of 'Flahm,' and as time passed, our entire race inherited the name."

"Wow…I didn't know there was such a legend." Falanya nodded with admiration.

Mirabelle continued, "They say it was a red-haired Flahm who built a prosperous kingdom for our people in the West. Many still believe that time will come again. If this child had been born with red hair, the Flahm would deify and expect too much from her."

"A kingdom of Flahm…?" Another tidbit that was news to Falanya.

Just as she was about to release a stream of questions…

"The master has returned."

Falanya and Mirabelle looked at the staff member who had spoken from the entrance of the room. Silas was there.

"Welcome back, dear." Mirabelle smiled with Elise in her arms.

Silas approached her and stroked Elise's cheek with his finger. "Anything happen while I was away?"

"Not at all. Her Highness and I have been playing with the baby."

He nodded and turned toward Falanya. "I apologize for making you entertain my child, Your Highness. You're supposed to be our guest."

"Please. I've been enjoying myself. This is so new to me, too. Besides, I appreciate all the interesting things Mirabelle has been teaching me."

"I'm glad to hear it," Silas said, smiling.

"Are you finished for the day?" Mirabelle asked.

He shook his head. "No, I must go to the palace for a short while. There seems to be something going down in Nalthia."

Falanya twitched.

News was traveling through the Empire that Demetrio had lost in his fight against Bardloche… It had reached Falanya's ears, of course. People were speculating that Demetrio had somehow escaped, but there was still no information on the safety of Wein, who was with him.

"…Falanya."

"I'm okay, Nanaki. Wein won't die."

Falanya turned to Nanaki and smiled. "By the way, Sir Silas, did anything become of the two things we discussed earlier?"

"You will be pleased to hear one item of business is going smoothly. The several people that Your Highness wishes to meet are awaiting you at the Imperial Palace. If you would like, I can accompany you there shortly."

"Thank you, Sir Silas. Well, I suppose I shall hurry and get ready."

She was worried about her brother, but her gut told her he was safe. Moreover, Falanya knew she had more to think about than Wein's welfare at the moment.

I'll fulfill my duty. I know you will, too, Wein.

Falanya took action, knowing her prayers would reach her brother.

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Lowellmina had been incredibly busy since the Imperial princes' armies began to move.

After all, Lowellmina didn't have many forces to mobilize. She was the leader of the patriots, a group of those concerned about the future of their nation. They might have agreed with her desire for a peaceful end to things, but they weren't trying to put her on the throne.

She might have been absorbing information about each area through any possible means, but Lowellmina didn't have nearly enough assistance to help her attain detailed reports. Even just keeping up with the princes' situations had worked them to the bone.

"So where is Demetrio now?" Lowellmina asked.

Fyshe riffled through her mountain of paperwork for the appropriate document. "Right. He's retreated to the city of Bellida, currently regrouping his remaining forces."

"…I wonder how many soldiers will return with him."

History proved that the losers of any battle were met with disaster.

It was easy to talk about making a comeback, but accomplishing it was a different matter.

"It seems he currently has around three thousand soldiers gathered in the city. If he can salvage five thousand, that would be remarkable. I imagine quite a few have lost their lives."

"So of his fifteen thousand, ten thousand were either killed or fled the battlefield."

A staggering number. This was on top of the casualties in Bardloche's army, too. Just imagining the battlefield was nauseating.

“Prince Bardloche is currently reorganizing his forces. Prince Manfred has nearly assembled enough of his own soldiers, but we aren’t sure how he might act next.”

“And Wein?”

“We don’t know much about him. There has been no report of his death, so I presume he is still with Prince Demetrio, but…”

“Hmm,” Lowellmina said, seeming uneasy.

Bardloche had won the fight against Demetrio. So the problem was whatever happened next. How would each of the remaining forces make their move?

“There is one more matter to discuss. It’s about Falanya’s odd behaviors.”

“What’s been so odd?”

“Through Sir Silas, we know she has been making plans to meet with high-level officials and top business leaders in the Imperial Capital.”

“Well, she’s finally in the capital. Of course she would use this chance to make personal connections. —However…”

If this were any other princess, she wouldn’t have thought twice about it. But this was Falanya. Lowellmina knew through experience that she couldn’t underestimate her.

“Princess Falanya’s voice has the lilt of a devil.”

Voices meant everything for politicians. One that was easy on the ear and traveled far could elevate a speech. Wein and Lowellmina’s voices fell into that category; Wein could muster up his soldiers’ morale, and Lowellmina make all forget their fears.

Falanya was on a whole different level, however. Back in Mealtars, she had spurred three thousand citizens into action with her words alone. Neither Wein nor Lowellmina could have pulled off such a feat. Soldiers, maybe, but not average citizens as Falanya had done. They couldn’t fight and didn’t possess the will to walk forward. But she did it. It was a miracle.

Falanya was a wild card meant to get me to take a gamble. I thought her role ended there, but does she have other motives…?

Could Falanya do in the capital what she did in Mealtars?

Lowellmina felt chances were slim. Though her voice had been hypnotizing, a number of factors had contributed to the events in Mealtars. That said, she couldn’t let her guard down.

“Fyshe, do we have anyone free at the moment?”

“We do not. But I can work something out if need be.”

“In that case, tighten the surveillance around Princess Falanya. At the very least, find out who she meets.”

“Understood.”

Lowellmina was burning through her cards. It was nice to have some cushion for an emergency, but it wasn’t feasible in their current situation.

Was Wein the one tying up her hands? He had to be.

That jerk, Lowellmina thought, mentally slapping him.

“—Pardon me!” A messenger flew into the room.

“What is it?” Lowellmina asked, having a bad feeling about this. A bead of sweat trickled down her face.

“Prince Bardloche is preparing to hold the baptism in Nalthia!”

She sensed the imaginary Wein that she had been slapping around flash a grin.

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Something strange was going on inside Nalthia. Glen realized this soon after the battle with Demetrio’s army.

First of all, the citizens of Nalthia had been against Bardloche’s army occupying the city. He had charged into sacred land, intent on interrupting their time-honored ceremony. Of course they weren’t happy.

Now that Demetrio had lost, the baptism was obviously postponed. Glen had assumed this would put the citizens in an even worse mood.

So how can I explain this?

From what Glen could tell as he patrolled the city, the people were in a strangely festive mood. He initially thought Bardloche’s supporters in Nalthia were celebrating his victory, but it seemed cheer had spread across the entire city.

Well, we’ll be withdrawing from the city as soon as we’ve cleaned up after the war. Are they that overjoyed to be free of us soon? But… Glen contemplated in the guardroom.

A subordinate came rushing in. “Captain Glen, I’ve just returned!”

The man was a native from Nalthia. Glen had ordered him to search his hometown for answers to this inexplicable situation.

“So did you find out anything?”

The subordinate’s report was far from expected. “Well…I can’t pinpoint

the exact source, but rumors have it that Prince Bardloche will undergo the baptism."

"What did you say?" Glen asked, scowling involuntarily. "What are you talking about? Don't we have plans to withdraw soon?"

"Yes, but for some reason, this has been spreading among the citizens… causing their restlessness."

"……"

The ceremonial baptism was extremely important to the people of Nalthia. They didn't care who underwent it. Now that the eldest prince had been fended off, they must have thought Bardloche would be a far more suitable Emperor.

If that's what's going on… Sweat ran down Glen's spine. He didn't have a good feeling about this and stood up. "Do you know the source of the rumors?"

"There are several reports of people seeing unfamiliar faces when they heard the rumors. I don't know if that's related."

"Where were they spotted?" Glen spread out a map on a nearby table.

"Here and here…so mostly around the northern district."

"…That's by the lake."

Veijyu Lake was in Nalthia. The northern district was adjacent to the lake and transported a great deal of water. These waterways were the lifeline of Nalthia. Any kind of military activity would not be received well, which was why it had been given free rein despite Bardloche's army occupying that area.

"Summon all hands. We're heading to the north. I'll go ahead and scope the area out."

"Please wait. The citizens will be enraged if we step in without reason, especially if you go by yourself, Captain."

"We're up against time. Hurry!"

"…Agh, fine! Please don't do anything reckless before everyone has assembled!"

The unit member scrambled out of the guardroom. Glen put on his cloak, hung his sword at his side, and headed outside.

The northern part of the city was as lively as ever when Glen arrived.

It thrived off aquatic life caught in Veijyu Lake and served as a trading hub for other cities adjacent to the lake. Transporting goods over water was easier than on land, since it was all flat and used wind power to move packed ships.

The problem is that we haven't been too diligent when patrolling the area, so we can avoid obstructing free trade.

Veijyu Lake was crucial to the Empire; they would never allow bandits to run rampant, but the reality was that a few unsavory types managed to sneak in.

"Pardon me. Have you seen any suspicious or unfamiliar persons in this area?" Glen asked the owner of a fruit stall. He didn't know much about Nalthia. Sniffing around for clues was going to be his best bet.

"Other than the one right in front of me?" The man shrugged.

Glen took a piece of fruit and handed over a silver coin. "Besides myself and other military personnel."

"Who knows? There's always people coming and going from these boats."

"Well, have you heard anything about Prince Bardloche undergoing the baptism?"

"Ah. Yeah, I heard. I'm pretty sure I heard the sailors by the docks talking about it."

"At the dock, huh… Well, excuse me."

"No problem. Hey, take another one for the road." The owner suggested he buy by the carton next time.

The captain took his fruit and headed farther north of the city. After walking for some time, he arrived at the docks. There, he found sailors lugging cargo, merchants inspecting wares, and people fishing. Glen scanned the area and made his way toward a group of sailors doing nothing in particular.

"Excuse me. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Excuse you?" The sailors glared at Glen. "Hey, we got an army man. This isn't a place for someone like yerself. Go on home."

"I promise I'll leave as soon as you answer my questions."

"Tch. You're starting to get annoying, dude."

Glen refused to back down. The air was starting to get heavy. One of the sailors eyed the fruit in Glen's hands.

"We'll tell you anything if you can show us a trick with that piece of

fruit."

"…With this?"

"Yeah. Or is that too hard for a military man who can only swing his sword?"

The men barked with laughter. Glen didn't react, looking between the fruit in his hands and the men before smiling.

"—Well then, don't take your eyes off me."

"Huh?"

Glen chucked the fruit in the air.

As soon as the sailors looked up, he launched himself off the ground. He drove the heel of his palm into the stomach of one defenseless sailor and simultaneously struck the chin and legs of another. Noticing something was off, the last sailor reacted, just as Glen closed in on him, wrapping around his arm and slamming him into the ground.

"Ow…?!"

"What the hell is your problem?!"

"H-he's a monster…!"

The sailors were on the ground in a second. As he stared down at them, Glen caught the fruit that fell from the sky.

"I told you not to take your eyes off me."

"Y-you little…! Don't screw with—gah?!"

Just as one of them tried to lash out at him, Glen stuffed the fruit in his mouth.

"I don't have much time. We can continue this later, but just know I might break a bone or two next time." There was something fierce in Glen's expression.

The sailors had to be less experienced than him, and they knew it. The men gulped and admitted defeat.

"O-okay, we're sorry. Please just show us some mercy…!"

"Of course. As I said before, I just need you to answer a few questions."

"Wh-what is it? We haven't done anything to warrant suspicion from army men."

"That isn't it. Have you heard about Prince Bardloche undergoing the ceremony?"

The sailors all looked at one another.

"Did you know about it?"

"Nope. I got no interest in the Emperor or whatsoever."

"I heard. It's that whole thing about Prince Bardloche becoming Emperor now that Prince Demetrio got his ass beat."

Glen looked at the man who said this. "Where did you hear that?"

"I-I couldn't tell ya. I guess I heard it from somebody on some ship…"

"Do you know where they are now?"

The sailor shook his head. "A crazy number of ships pass through here every day. I can't remember who got on what boat."

"……" Glen thought for a minute.

The rumors must have started from this dock, but I need time to investigate who traveled through this place. If only I had some sort of clue…

He was never a bright one. If he had his friends from the military academy with him, they'd come up with an idea and plan their next move in no time, but his friends weren't with him at the moment. Gone were the days when he could just tag along with their ideas.

"Hey, you're looking for a suspicious character, right?" one of the sailors suddenly asked, seeming timid.

"Well, yeah."

"In that case, you might find somethin' if you check out the food warehouse district across the way." The sailor indicated a stretch of land with several storehouses near the docks. It was where incoming and outgoing cargo were temporarily placed.

"All of us are short-staffed because of the draft. It's not hard to find empty warehouses these days. But I've seen people wandering around in the middle of the night lately."

"……"

If there was a criminal spreading rumors, they would want to carry out their work discreetly. The docks had plenty of escape routes, making them an ideal spot. It made sense for them to secure a hideout next to it.

"That was a solid lead. I appreciate it."

After tossing the sailors a silver coin, Glen headed for the warehouses.

It was still high noon, so there was some traffic in the warehouse district, which hosted a cluster of buildings big and small. Glen glanced around for any suspicious characters, but none were to be found so easily. It was Glen's first time here, so *everyone* was unfamiliar to him.

Should I check each warehouse…?

Waiting for his subordinates to arrive was his best option.

Just then, he caught something in the corner of his eye.

"That was…" His legs moved on their own, carrying him farther into the warehouse district as if it were luring him there.

It can't be, he thought. The human shadow he'd seen was familiar, but he knew this person couldn't have possibly been there.

He finally arrived at a desolate warehouse. No one was around, but when he looked at the ground, there was definitive proof that people had been there recently.

"—Hah!" He immediately unsheathed his sword and slashed at the wooden door. After kicking it down, he stepped inside.

It smelled like mold and dust. There wasn't a single lit torch in the warehouse, and only the light pouring in from the entrance illuminated his surroundings. After his eyes adjusted to the darkness, a figure standing inside was revealed to him.

"I knew it. So it *was* you…"

Glen didn't seem perturbed. In fact, it looked like he understood now.

"I see what's going on. This was all his plan. —Isn't that right, Ninym?"

Her white hair fluttered in the darkness, red eyes gleaming. It was Ninym Ralei.

"I guess I can't feign ignorance and ask what you're talking about."

Like Glen, Ninym remained unfazed. She faced him as if it were perfectly normal for her old friend to suddenly step inside the warehouse.

"You could try and see if it works." Glen had a nostalgic look in his eye, smiling.

They had spent their days together at the same military academy. Ninym would beg him to help her stop Wein from running wild. Glen would come to her for advice on picking a gift for his fianc e. Between them was a bond that would never change…

"Either way, I'll capture you," he said.

They pointed their blades at each other as if that was normal.

"And what would my charges be?"

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“I’ll decide once I catch you.”

“Seems unfair.”

He could detect no anger or sadness in her voice. After all, they didn’t think being enemies and friends was mutually exclusive. Because they were friends, they knew what the other was capable of doing.

“—Hah!” Glen made the first move.

His blade flashed in the darkness, straight as an arrow. Ninym dodged with incredible agility and immediately returned this with throwing knives.

Glen shot down each one with ease. “Did you sneak in during the battle with Demetrio?”

“It was your fault for neglecting to guard the dock out of respect for the people of Nalthia.” Ninym melted into the darkness. Her white hair and red eyes disappeared. “Because of you, I could slip inside here during the battle.”

“Using fifteen thousand soldiers as a decoy, huh? Old habits die hard for that guy, huh!”

Glen swung his blade in the direction of her voice, striking empty warehouse boxes, which scattered into the air. Undoing her disappearing act, Ninym sprung from the darkness and closed in on Glen. Sparks sprayed. Glen’s sword stopped Ninym’s dagger. They didn’t engage in locked combat. Instead, Ninym quickly leaped back to put distance between them.

“After sneaking into Nalthia, you spread rumors about Bardloche undergoing the ceremonial baptism and pushed your ideas by weaponizing what was important to the citizens.”

“It wasn’t very difficult. Every Imperial citizen is hoping to have an Emperor soon.”

“—But I made it just in the nick of time.”

Glen’s presence seemed to grow bigger, an intimidating air about him. His sword was at the ready, and there wasn’t a single point of weakness to be found from the tip of his blade to the soles of his feet. He was starting to get serious. He had the pride of an army man who refused to back down from a certain rival during his days at the academy.

“Surrender. If you confess to my master, I promise you’ll be treated well —on my name.”

Ninym shook her head. “Do you think I would do such a thing?”

“Then let me ask a question: Do you think you can beat me with that blade?”

“Warmer. You almost got it.” Ninym broke into a smile. “Why do you

think I'm challenging you to a swordfight that I have no chance of winning?"

"_____" An instant later, he heard a strange noise from behind him.

Glen knew without even looking that something had blocked the entrance that he'd recently kicked in. His adversary vaulted into the air. He quickly tried to cut her down with his sword, but he was too late. When he looked up to follow her, he saw people balanced on the beams of the warehouse. They had pulled Ninym up with the black rope in their hands.

His eyes scanned the room, looking for a way to chase after them. This time, however, a strange noise boomed from the building itself.

"This is…?!"

"Isn't it normal to prepare a way to eliminate your pursuers or two? Well, I never imagined I'd be using them on you."

"You're a real piece of work…!"

The walls and ceiling of the storehouse began to crumble. Ninym swiftly escaped through the emergency hatch in the ceiling that had been prepared ahead of time.

"Until we meet again, Glen."

A moment later, the storehouse came crashing down on him.

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Ninym glanced at the pile of rubble that used to be a building, then she followed behind her other companions and ran through the shadows of the warehouse district.

"Lady Ninym, what shall we do next?"

"We'll escape before we're followed," Ninym replied frankly. "They'll know about us soon enough. We don't have a moment to lose."

"Won't it take them some time? I mean, the man is dead."

"He won't die that easy," Ninym said, briefly looking behind her at the now-distant warehouse. She was certain her friend was still alive, even though he was trapped in the rubble. "Either way, our job here is done. Glen might have talked big, but they won't make it here on time. So all that's left is heading back."

"Understood."

They traveled from shadow to shadow, soundlessly leaving Nalthia behind.

"…Hey. What's going on here?"

The sailors who had just fought Glen were dumbfounded by the scene. They had followed Glen out of sheer interest, but all that awaited them was a demolished storehouse.

"This place *was* pretty run-down. Did it fall apart from old age?"

"Maybe… Hey, you don't think that guy from earlier is under here, do you?"

"He couldn't be…"

The sailors looked at one another and gingerly called out. "H-hey! Someone there?!"

No response. Maybe they were worrying over nothing. Or maybe he was already dead beneath the rubble. Either way, the wreckage would have to be cleared.

"Guess we got no choice. We better call people over and get this mess cleaned up."

"Right… Wait, hold on a sec. Over there."

All eyes zeroed in on the spot where one sailor pointed. The mountain of debris began to move.

No way.

Emerging was a mound several times heavier than the average person.

"You can't be serious."

"Damn. Is he really human…?"

As the sailors stood in shock, Glen pushed scraps of beam and ceiling out of the way.

"…Phew. She got me." Glen tossed the chunks to the side, shook the dust from his cloak, and looked off into the distance. "If I follow them now…I won't catch up to them."

Failing to capture the criminals was a major blunder. He hadn't planned on going easy on his friend, but his insistence on capturing her alive might have dulled his sword.

"H-hey, you."

"Hm? Oh, you're the guys from before," Glen replied, noticing them only after they'd called out. "Sorry. I'll reimburse the warehouse owner later, promise."

"S-sure…"

"Well, it's really not like we could hold you, even if we wanted to…"

To the sailors, Glen was more iron than man. They had no desire to lay a

hand on him for a bounty.

"Captain!" One of Glen's subordinates appeared from a narrow alley of the warehouse district. "Captain, what are you doing?! And what's all this?!"

He went bug-eyed at the sight of the collapsed warehouse. Glen picked up the sword by his feet and spoke as he sheathed it.

"No time to explain. Let's save that for later and hurry back to headquarters. There is something I must tell Prince Bardloche."

The subordinate seemed to gulp. "P-please wait! I'm here to tell you there's trouble at our headquarters!"

"What? What happened?"

"Well—"

As soon as Glen heard the man's answer, he raced back to their base.

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Bardloche's army was currently using a building in Nalthia as its headquarters. The prince and his top officials had been locked in the meeting room all night and day, investigating and deciding on their next plan—

Someone barked in the room. "You're kidding! Are you serious?!"

The voice, now hoarse with fury, came from Prince Bardloche himself. His leaders sat in a row before him. Though their master was furious, their expressions were resolute, ready for battle.

"I would never say that on a whim or to save face. Understand that this was a unanimous decision. Let me say it again: Your Highness, please take this opportunity to go through with the baptism."

"……!" Bardloche's face instantly twisted. "Have you forgotten that we've taken this city for justice?! We needed to put an end to Demetrio's tyrannical ideas! Touting justice and chasing out Demetrio, only to do the same thing, will make me a joke for generations."

"No one is laughing. You must know, Your Highness, the people wish for a new Emperor as soon as possible. With this sweeping victory, they are now certain that you, Prince Bardloche, are the most suitable for the role, and they are hoping for your quick ascension. Betraying them and returning to our own territory will turn us into laughingstocks!"

They weren't backing down, even when Bardloche scolded them. Far from it, in fact. Bardloche didn't have control over them.

"…What about Manfred? We collaborated under the condition that I

return to my own domain after putting a stop to Demetrio. If I betray him, he won't stay silent."

"It's just what we need. If you defeat Prince Demetrio *and* Prince Manfred, there would be no greater proof that you're qualified to become Emperor."

Bardloche tried his best to put an end to this discussion. Both sides were snapping at each other. Tensions were mounting…until Lorencio rapped on the table and got their attention, ending his silence.

"Let's take a short recess. You're losing your composure."

"Sir Lorencio, this is a grave matter. We have no time to waste!"

"Precisely why we must clear our heads. If we could place Prince Bardloche on the throne through wishful thinking, it would have happened ages ago."

Lorencio was an earl and the most senior member among them. Other leaders went silent, though reluctantly.

"…All right. We'll take a short break. Collect your thoughts," Bardloche said.

The meeting went into a short recess.

Glen headed straight for Lorencio's room upon his arrival.

"Ah, Glen. I'm busy at the moment. Let's save this for later."

Lorencio seemed to be in the middle of something, but Glen was persistent.

"My apologies, but this concerns the baptism. I'm afraid I must speak with you immediately."

"Oh, so you already know. I take it you heard the rumors during your patrol?" Lorencio asked, urging Glen to take a seat. "So what news do you bring?"

"The people of Nalthia want the prince to go through with the baptism, but I have proof that this is all part of Prince Demetrio's plan… No, that it's *Prince Wein's* plan."

Glen recounted how he had gone to the north to pinpoint the source of the rumors, come across covert operatives in the warehouse, and engaged in battle, but failed to capture them.

Lorencio thought for a moment before speaking. "…Glen, does anyone

else know about this besides you and me?"

"No."

Lorencio nodded. "In that case, speak of this matter to no one. Act as if it never happened."

"What?" Glen blinked. "P-please wait. I'll accept whatever punishment awaits me for allowing the perpetrators to escape. But at this rate…"

"Prince Bardloche will complete the ceremonial baptism. Isn't that wonderful?" Lorencio asked with a savage smile that made him seem younger than his age. "Prince Bardloche might be troubled now, but he'll soon come to realize he shouldn't let this opportunity pass. I suppose I must be grateful to Prince Wein. He has saved us time persuading the people."

"Sir! The enemy must have let this happen, because they have a way to win! We're jumping into their trap!"

"If it's a trap, we can chew through it," Lorencio reasoned. "Don't you get it? The Empire needs a ruler. What would happen if we allowed this opportunity to pass us by? It'll trigger a political battle with the youngest prince, and we'll continue to waste time."

Lorencio had a point.

If pressed for an answer, Glen knew it was now or never. He would have gone along with it if he hadn't known that this was orchestrated by a certain someone.

However, Glen *was* familiar with the people in question. Ninym and Wein were arranging all of this behind the scenes.

"Sir, we should tell Prince Bardloche at the very least…!"

"No. You're dismissed."

His pleas were in vain. There wasn't anything he could do. Glen left the room, face clouded over, all while sensing a new battle would soon be upon them.

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"Basically, it's not just the citizens who are getting impatient," Wein said in a room in Bellida. "For the common Imperial subject, it's obvious that the most sensible way to resolve this matter is through discussion, but they'll only rally around that if they can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Without progress, their patience will expire, and they'll want more extreme measures to get the job done. This goes for citizens *and* factions."

Demetrio was the only other one in the room. Wein would have never imagined they'd be facing each other across a desk when they joined teams.

Wein continued, "That's not all. The factions aren't just serving leaders out of loyalty alone. They're thinking about future honor, concessions, rewards, bestowed by the chosen Emperor. Their patience is fading, as they wait two years with nothing to show for their effort."

"…I know what you're getting at," Prince Demetrio responded, nodding with a pained expression. "One of the reasons I set out to become Emperor was because I was starting to lose control over them."

"Right? I imagine you're not the only one. Not many people would see an opportunity for victory and not jump at it. But their ability to reason with their subordinates is waning. All because they won this big battle against your army."

"…Don't get too cocky."

"My bad." Wein shrugged.

Demetrio glared at Wein for a moment but decided to continue despite his obvious displeasure.

"Will Bardloche go along with this?"

"Prince Bardloche's and Prince Manfred's factions are in competition. Even if one of them wins, they will take a big blow. I imagine Prince Bardloche was hoping to absorb your faction, bolster his influence, and overwhelm Prince Manfred in the next battle."

Wein continued, "However, the people are pressuring him to rise to the throne, and even his subordinates agree with them. His faction is made up of mostly army men. Since he rules over guys who are violent for a living, Bardloche will lose his popularity and respect if he shows weakness. —He'll take the plunge. No question about it."

"…And if he does that, Manfred won't be able to just sit back and watch. He'll have no choice but to lead his forces into battle."

"And while the two are biting at each other's heels, we'll make off with the gains."

"Ngh…" Demetrio groaned.

Wein was playing a single card: cementing the desire of the people in Nalthia. And that had given Demetrio a chance at winning. How terrifying the foreign prince's foresight was.

"So I'd like to command the next battle," Wein said.

In all other circumstances, the mere act of a foreign prince requesting to

control his forces would be a declaration of war. Demetrio had known this man was poison and kept his distance. Wein was lethal.

So was he going to drink the poison or not?

"…Can you win?"

"I have my methods. It's all about using a little creativity."

Demetrio closed his eyes for a moment before answering in a strained voice. "……Give me time to think about it."

Demetrio would wait until the last minute to decide, but Wein didn't press him further, almost as if he was certain that Demetrio would eventually drink the poison without prompting.

"I can wait. It gives me time to enjoy a nice glass of wine before the battle breaks out between the younger two princes."

Wein grinned and raised the glass in his hand.

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"…He got me," Prince Manfred murmured, looking at a map. "Now, I *have* to fight Bardloche."

He'd received word that the middle prince was planning on going through with the baptism.

"That brother of mine is too stupid for his own good. I don't imagine he became greedy overnight to get the jump on me. He obviously lost control of his faction and was pushed into it."

Manfred continued, "It was Prince Wein who triggered them to do that. —Right, Strang?"

"No doubt." Next to him, Strang nodded respectfully. "Of course, they're far away, so we can't get any conclusive proof. But it hasn't even been that long since Prince Demetrio was defeated, and we've suddenly found ourselves going up against Bardloche. He's in the perfect spot to sweep in and steal the spoils. Very on brand for Prince Wein."

"It seems a little slipshod and forced to me…but you know him better. If that's what you say, I'll take your word."

Manfred knew Strang had been friends with Wein, Glen, and Lowellmina back in military school. The Imperial prince initially suspected that Strang was colluding with outside forces, but the man was more attached to his hometown than his friends. Manfred was certain that he would not betray him, as long as Strang's birthplace saw some kind of gain.

“Our next steps are crucial… So can we win?”

“Yes,” Strang replied without missing a beat. “Bardloche’s army is composed of military personnel, making it quite powerful. This means pretty much everything else is their weakness. Now that they’re exhausted from their fight against Demetrio, I think we have a solid shot at winning.”

This wasn’t his ego speaking. Back in school, Wein always had the best grades in his class, but Glen had pulled ahead in military arts and Strang in tactics. This was why Manfred had made him his right-hand man.

“Hmm… In that case, what should we be concerned about?”

“Demetrio’s army. More specially, Wein. We must prevent them from striking us from the side as we’re locked in a fight with Bardloche. This is critical.”

Manfred nodded. Because he’d let them off the leash, he now had to face Bardloche’s army. He knew they had to do something. In fact, he was painfully aware of the fact.

“…Strang, the time has come to enact the plan that you suggested we prepare.”

“Yes. Prince Demetrio’s faction has suffered significant damage, so we’re likely to achieve optimal results… I would have not liked to ever use it, since I’m technically an Imperial subject, though I’m from the provinces.”

“It’s a sacrifice made in the name of victory. Move forward with our plans.”

“Understood.” Strang bowed.

Demetrio versus Bardloche.

That fight had gone to Bardloche.

…Except it had failed to settle anything and only invited further chaos.

—You'll make a grand Emperor.

That was what his late mother always used to say. She would always repeat that the Empire would grow even more prosperous with him on the throne.

Since he was the eldest son, it was obvious he was going to become Emperor. But his mother's reminders never bothered him. He knew it was because she had love and high hopes for him and the country. He never questioned it.

To show his love to his mother, he would nod back, showering her with gifts of words, poetry, and the occasional flower garland. *Trust me, Mother*, he would think. *I'll become a great Emperor.*

—You'll make a grand Emperor.

The first time he killed someone was when he was ten.

He'd slain a low-ranking official for disrespecting his mother.

His mother was from a foreign nation. She had loved her homeland and a certain man, blessed to be born into nobility and with beauty that captivated all. If nothing had happened, she would have lived a peaceful life in her native land.

For better or for worse, however, the Emperor had fallen in love with her at first sight.

—You'll make a grand Emperor.

For the sake of her country, his mother abandoned love to become the wife of the Emperor. That was her noble sacrifice.

What could she have done, however, in a palace with secret plots and alliances? She had no knowledge of how these things worked nor any allies.

In the end, her homeland was ransacked by the Empire, taking the life of the man she loved with it. Those with bad intentions mocked her, saying that after she'd lost everything, her heart must have hardened with resentment. They said she would turn into a poison that would eat away at the Empire one day.

Ridiculous! His mother was the Empress and an upstanding citizen. And she had him now. How could she resent a nation to be inherited by her own child? She would never turn her back on their country as long as she loved her children.

That was how it was supposed to go down.

—You'll make a grand Emperor.

When he happened across his mother crushing his gift of a flower wreath and tossing it to the side, he started to wonder, *Does Mother really love me?*

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"Aww, yeah! We got this in the bag!" Wein crowed in the room assigned to him, looking at the map where he'd jotted down the current state of affairs.

"Careful not to get the rug pulled from under your feet," Ninym warned, safely returned from Nalthia. "We might have orchestrated a battle between the two younger princes, but don't forget that Demetrio has sustained major damage. And we still haven't gotten official confirmation that you're going to be in charge of his troops."

"Oh, we don't have to worry about that," Wein insisted. "I imagined Demetrio would be resistant, but he went along with the plan. If he gives the all clear, we'll figure out the rest."

"If you're sure…but I'm a little surprised. I thought he'd decline your offer until the end."

"Yeah, you would think. Now that you mention it, Demetrio hasn't been too critical of me since we partnered up. Not sure why."

Wein had expected the prince to be openly hostile, but he listened to his

opinions without rejecting him outright, though he did keep Wein at a distance. It was a happy miscalculation, but they didn't know anything that would explain his attitude.

"Maybe he learned some restraint because he knows he doesn't have many options?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Having both malleable and unyielding personality traits is what makes us human. I have a feeling that restraint might fall in the unyielding category here…but hey, I don't think we need to sweat it." Wein shrugged. "At any rate, it's better if Demetrio is cooperative. Now, we just have to figure out when we can step into the battle between the other princes. We'll blindside 'em at the perfect moment…!"

"I wonder how well that will go. Did you forget they have Glen and Strang, who know how you operate?"

As soon as Ninym said their friends' names, Wein looked at her seriously.

"Oh, yeah. You said you ran into Glen. How'd that go?"

"I think he's trained even more since the last time we saw him. I would have been able to hold out against him back in school, but now he's untouchable. I think he was showing restraint because he intended to capture me alive. If he'd wanted to kill me, it would have taken all I had to escape."

Ninym served as Wein's aide, but this composed girl possessed unimaginable physical prowess. She knew horses and swords like the back of her hand, confident enough to take on two or three average soldiers alone without breaking a sweat.

Even Ninym, however, was admitting that she was no match for Glen. Wein had always lagged behind him when it came to combat, too. Back at the academy, they had called Glen "the Human Iron," "the man who could get out of a carriage crash unscathed," and "Hundred-Man Powerhouse," but he had apparently outgrown these monikers.

"If Glen is that strong now, we should assume Strang is, too. Doesn't Manfred consider him a close confidant? There is a good chance he'll be a commander in Manfred's army."

If Glen's forte was in combat, Strang's was in strategy. His battle tactics weren't just effective. His habit was striking the enemy's metaphorical vitals without mercy. In school, they called him "a poison of a man in glasses," "the man with a bounty out for his spectacles," and "the terrifying tactician from the provinces."

"Good point. The guy was a monster during war exercises in class. If we have to battle him head-to-head, I'll have to admit we won't be in the best position."

Even though he said that, Wein—"the dreaded SOB," "the one who made devils look cute," "the man with everything except looks and personality"—grinned wide.

"His forte is in strategy. In other words, he's only strong on the battlefield. If we can get him when he's out of his element, we'll be fine."

"…You're thinking of doing something awful again, aren't you?"

"I want to be a gentleman, but devilish temptation won't let me."

"Must be nice being popular." Ninym seemed exasperated.

She suddenly looked outside the window.

"Something wrong?"

"There's some sort of commotion in front of the gate."

"…Before schedule, huh? It seems either the middle or the youngest prince has made his move." Wein stood up. "I'll go see Demetrio. He should be ready to put me in command by now."

He left for Demetrio's room, Ninym tagging behind him. As he approached the door flanked with guards, he could hear someone arguing inside the room. The stationed soldiers had indescribable looks on their faces. Wein didn't know which prince was making his move, but Demetrio had to be enraged.

"—Pardon me." Wein glanced at the guards before opening the door with an innocent look.

Sure enough, he found a messenger and Demetrio inside.

"May I ask what's going on?"

Wein guessed it was Prince Manfred who had made the first move. Prince Bardloche must have prioritized recovering from the battle. Manfred would have trouble laying a hand on him in Nalthia, which spoke favorably of the middle prince.

Of course, Manfred wouldn't stay silent. He had to sway public opinion and denounce Bardloche. The plan was to get the people on his side. That was what Wein was hoping would happen. By manipulating Manfred's actions, Wein could create an opportunity for himself to throw them off their game.

Ah, nothing like a scheme going right! Wein thought.

"…They're rebelling," Demetrio said shortly.

Wein blinked. "…They're rebelling?"

"…That's right."

"…Where?"

"…In my faction's domain."

"……"

A long silence followed. Finally, Wein worked himself up to ask a question.

"Umm…I'm sorry. Let me hear that again. What's happening where? How big is it?"

Demetrio let out a heavy sigh. "There is a large rebellion happening in my domain—!"

"…Excuuuuuuse meeee?!"

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"So I suppose we've reached an agreement."

"Yes, that's fine with me."

In the Imperial Palace of the Earthworld Empire, two people sat across from each other at a desk. One was Imperial Princess Lowellmina, The other, Prince Manfred.

"This was unexpected. I didn't think you would use this strategy to stop Demetrio," Lowellmina said.

She had heard about the rebellion in the territory claimed by Demetrio and his faction. There were reports of looting and violence, and there were no signs of it stopping anytime soon.

Demetrio had gathered as many soldiers as possible for the battle against Bardloche. That included personnel tasked with maintaining public order and safeguarding the domain. Without them stationed, the domain had become temporarily lawless.

Manfred had set fire to this.

Demetrio had never had a stellar reputation. His people were already dissatisfied with him. The embers of their discontent were there. If he'd managed to win that battle against Bardloche, they might have thought twice about doing something, but he'd made a mistake that would land him in the history books. Setting those embers ablaze was a simple enough task.

Manfred did all this too fast for it to be a last-minute idea. They must have planned it out beforehand and used this opportunity to set it in motion.

Lowellmina turned her attention from Manfred to Strang, who stood at attention nearby.

"You came up with this plan, right, Strang? I didn't think you could fight outside the battlefield."

"……" Strang remained silent and unaffected. He was Manfred's subordinate first, Lowellmina's friend second. He kept his mouth shut.

"Of all the things to say. A baseless accusation, Lowellmina," Manfred replied, speaking in his stead. "Our older brother got what he deserved. If Demetrio had managed his territory, none of this would have happened. I never imagined his people were so unhappy with him that they would be spurred to rebellion."

"Pardon me. Demetrio's governance was the cause of the conflict, of course. So it was a total coincidence that this happened at a time that would benefit you the most."

"Heh, I imagine the heavens want to put me on the throne." Manfred smiled, shameless.

Lowellmina was about to rain on his parade. "But this is Demetrio we're talking about. He might say that even if he neglected his territory, all would be forgiven once he's Emperor."

"That won't change a thing. I already have a pledge from the prime minister."

"_____" Lowellmina's eyes darted.

The prime minister. The man holding the Empire together after the passing of the Emperor. It was said he was the only reason why the Empire had managed to survive years of in-fighting among the princes.

Manfred continued, "He said that if Demetrio continues to do nothing, we might have to deploy Imperial forces to stop the rebellion or he could be stripped of his domain."

It was easy to assume that all the Imperial soldiers served under Prince Bardloche, but that wasn't true. In fact, his faction made up less than a third of the total forces. Rather than belonging to one prince's personal army, most commanders and soldiers serving in the Imperial forces remained neutral. They numbered in the tens of thousands, quick to move in an emergency.

"…I'm surprised. I suppose even the prime minister can't let the Empire burn to the ground, though he's let all of you fool around until now."

"'Fool around,' huh? Ouch," Manfred said with a pleasant smile. "Speaking of surprised, Lowellmina, I'm the one who's shocked that you're

even making this deal. I never thought you'd be willing to provide for my army."

Manfred's forces had convened outside Grantsrale.

He'd heard of Demetrio's defeat and started preparations to disband his army, but he found himself forced to get ready for battle after Bardloche changed directions. That meant his main issues were people and supplies. Manfred only had enough to carry out a pincer attack, but it wasn't early enough to fight against Bardloche.

He had used his connections to gather personnel, but he still fell extremely short.

That was when Lowellmina approached him.

"An eldest brother weaponizing his army for his own needs. A middle brother absorbing the very vices that he was trying to stop. Neither has the makings of an Emperor. So I shall aid you, Manfred."

Lowellmina convinced the patriots and supplied Manfred's forces with everything they required. For Manfred, it was a miracle, which was why he made sure to use his limited time to visit her in the capital. Of course, he wasn't stupid enough to take her words at face value.

"So, Lowellmina? What are you after?"

"What am I after, you ask? Prosperity and stability of the Empire, of course."

"Then shouldn't you stay out of this and just watch as we 'fool around'?" Manfred retorted.

She might have been his little sister, but their relationship was purely by blood. He never once thought of her as his adorable sister. The feeling was mutual: Lowellmina didn't love or respect him as her big brother.

Their relationship wasn't unique. All royalty had their own status and territory. It was determined by fate that they would conspire against one another to protect themselves. A child might not understand their situation, but they were old enough to consider the other a political opponent.

"Even if I have all the soldiers and commanders in the world, I'll get nowhere without resources. If I lose and Bardloche becomes Emperor, peace will return to the Empire… Isn't that what you should be after?"

"……"

"But you're intentionally balancing me out with Bardloche. And that's because…you plan on taking us both down." Manfred stared at Lowellmina. She gave a troubled smile and tilted her head. She was flustered by his verbal

attack.

But he knew she was just putting on an act.

“What could I gain from doing such a thing? Prolonging a fight among Imperial subjects will only destroy our power as a nation. There is no benefit to that.”

“But there is,” Manfred insisted. “There’s something you get when we’re both out of the picture.”

“I can’t imagine what that could possibly be.”

“You become Empress,” Manfred said, his words cutting into her. “With the three of us gone, the other Imperial princess should technically rise to the throne, but she’s out of the royal family. That means you would rise to the throne.”

“Oh.” Lowellmina giggled. “Someone is jumping at shadows. Such is the nature of those after the throne, I guess.”

“Are you saying that you don’t want to be Empress?”

“Precisely. I’m concerned for the future of the Empire. Nothing more. I could never dream of reaching such a position.”

“……”

Manfred and Lowellmina glared at each other for a few seconds. Then, Manfred smirked.

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“As long as you know your place, we have no issues. Besides, you wouldn’t have enough support even if you wanted to become Empress. You would just incite more chaos.”

“I think you’re right.”

Manfred stood up. “Then, my business here is done. Good talk, Lowellmina.”

“I pray for your continued health.”

“Ha, you don’t mean it. Let’s go, Strang.”

Manfred and Strang proceeded to leave the room. Strang glanced back at Lowellmina and offered a tiny smile. She waved at him.

When it was just her and Fyshe standing at attention nearby, Lowellmina clasped her hands together as if in prayer.

“…Your Highness, are you praying for Prince Manfred’s victory?”

“As if. I’m praying he’ll trip on the stairs and twist his ankle.”

“……”

“All right, that should do it. I bet he’ll hit his foot at least. Serves you right, jerk!” Lowellmina nodded in satisfaction. “By placing them on equal playing fields, Manfred will head to the battlefield with some margin for error. They won’t rush to make this a quick battle. That should buy us some time.”

“We never expected Prince Demetrio’s efforts to be obstructed…”

“I know! That was not cool of you, Strang…!” Lowellmina said, holding her head in her hands. “At this rate, either Bardloche or Manfred will win. But I wanted Demetrio to come out on top. That means…I’m in trouble! What am I supposed to do?!”

Just as Manfred had accused, Lowellmina had supplied his troops, hoping to prolong the battle. This would hopefully give her enough time to carry out her next move. But what should she do exactly? Lowellmina searched her mind for answers.

She turned to Fyshe. “How is Demetrio faring?”

“He seems rattled. Understandably so. He’s just lost a battle, and his people are rebelling. Many in his party are starting to think about returning home. I imagine it’d be difficult for him to stop them now.”

“…I anticipated he’d have five thousand soldiers left, but I guess we should adjust that. I imagine he has two thousand, tops.”

“With such a small army, I don’t suspect he’ll be able to step in and outmaneuver Bardloche and Manfred during their fight, even with Prince

Wein at the helm…”

Fyshe was probably right. Wein was no joke as an opponent, but he wasn’t a wizard. This situation must have locked him in a corner.

Will he call for troops from Natra? But that would basically wage war with the Empire. Maybe he’ll give up and go home? Knowing Wein, I bet he’ll hang on until the very last second. But who’s to say he’s not already at the end of his rope…? Lowellmina crossed her arms.

“Come to think of it,” Fyshe said. “Your Highness, I believe we discussed this morning that you’re scheduled for a meeting with Princess Falanya in the afternoon. We’re ahead of schedule, but are you ready to meet her?”

“Oh. Is she already at the Imperial Palace?”

Fyshe nodded.

They might be in the heart of the battle with Wein, but Falanya was still a member of the royal family in Natra. She might give them a clue to help them overcome this situation.

“Then, please call her at once—hm?” Lowellmina heard a commotion outside her window. She leaned forward to search the Imperial courtyard.

There, Lowellmina found the topic of their conversation, Falanya, standing with one more unexpected figure.

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“Phew…” Falanya sighed, perched on a bench in the courtyard.

Her schedule had been packed for the past few days. She’d been meeting with all kinds of important people in the capital.

On the surface, this was for the prosperity of Natra and the Empire. Her ulterior motive was to bully Lowellmina, which the Imperial princess already picked up on.

“Wein told me I just had to move around the capital, but…”

Falanya had accomplished an incredible feat back in Mealtars. Lowellmina would have to dedicate her attention and available pawns to tracking her if she was wandering through the capital. The Imperial princess had her eyes on the three princes, too, so Wein knew this would make things slowly difficult for her, like a sore spot after a body blow.

Falanya had mentioned to Wein that Lowellmina might trap her to limit her activity, but Wein smiled and assured her not to worry. He was convinced

that he could get Lowellmina to play along and that this would bolster Falanya's reputation at the expense of his own.

Lowellmina would want Falanya to spread her name by meeting with influential leaders. It fit into her goals. Wein bet she would resort to keeping an eye on Falanya after considering the situation.

And everything was going according to plan, a tricky one that was terrifyingly clever.

"I'm starting to think Wein might be a little scary to everyone other than me and Ninym. What do you think, Nanaki?"

"…Yeah." Nanaki barely stopped himself from saying, *More than "a little."*

"I think I get it now that I've been studying. To move a country, you can't just go after some pleasant utopia. You need to figure out what the people want, including their darker wishes," she said, convincing herself. "I'm going to work hard to be like him…!"

"……"

"Hey! Nanaki! I bet you're thinking I can't do it, huh?"

To be honest, he *didn't* think she could do it, and he didn't want her to become like him. Nanaki kept silent.

"I'll have you know that I still have energy to keep going. I'm just taking a quick break. To fulfill my duty to Wein and to work toward the future, I'm going to work very hard here."

"The future, huh…? Are you talking about that one request that you had for Silas?"

"I'm not sure if I'll work out, of course." Falanya stood up. "Break is officially over! I know we're ahead of schedule, but let's go back and wait for Princess Lowellmina."

Nanaki nodded and followed her…before opening his eyes wide.

"Falanya, stop!"

"Huh?"

Falanya's foot stepped on something strange. When she looked down to see what it was, she found a person collapsed on the ground.

"Mhgg?!" Falanya yelped incomprehensibly and jumped.

Nanaki quickly grabbed Falanya and hid her behind him.

"Um, Nanaki? Th-that's a dead body…"

"No…"

Falanya peeked over Nanaki's shoulder to get a good look. He didn't take

his eyes off them either.

"—I'm alive," said the person, rising slowly. "Ah, my apologies. I always get sleepy when I soak in the sun."

He was a lanky man, seemingly sloth-like. He had a five-o'clock shadow and wrinkled clothes.

He didn't seem like he belonged in the Imperial Palace, which was at the center of the Empire.

Nanaki didn't let his guard down, keeping Falanya behind him. "…That was surprising. I didn't sense your presence. You were like a corpse."

"I have a condition where my heart stops while I'm asleep."

"Really?"

"No, not really."

"……" Falanya eyed the man suspiciously.

This didn't seem to bother him. "I don't think I've seen either of you around these parts. Who are you? If you could trace back and tell me your family lineage, I'd appreciate it. If you're a suspicious character, I might have to call the guards on you, but I'm still too drowsy to walk or run to find them. Oh, I know! Maybe you can find them yourself, suspicious character or not."

"…Umm." *He* was the most suspect character, but Falanya decided it would only be polite to introduce herself. She bowed. "I am the crown princess of Natra, Falanya Elk Arbalest, currently visiting the Imperial Capital on an invitation from Princess Lowellmina."

The man nodded. "Princess Falanya. I see. Pardon me. So you must be King Owen's daughter. I can tell from your face that you're logical and intelligent."

"You know my father?"

"We've never met personally, but I was impressed by his governance when I was young and King Owen became the next successor in the long line of rulers. I remember it like it was yesterday. At the time, I worked for a civil officer. I had no money and a stomach that was always empty. My job was all I had. So I had this brilliant idea to trick myself into thinking my work documents were a five-course meal. I spent those days chewing through paper. What do you think happened to me after a month?"

"U-um, you successfully tricked yourself into thinking it was a five-course meal…?"

"No. As you might expect, I almost starved to death."

"……"

“Humans make bad mountain goats, you see. I spent a month learning a valuable lesson in my youth. These kinds of life experiences are often lost to later generations, but I will pass this knowledge down to you, Princess Falanya, to celebrate our meeting.”

“Um, okay.” She seriously wondered if he was picking a fight with her.

When she looked at Nanaki, he signaled with his eyes that the man was serious.

Isn’t that kind of worse? Falanya thought, but she had been raised a lady and smiled through her troubled expression.

“Thank you for sharing such a valuable lesson with me. I’m afraid I have some business to attend to, so if you’ll excuse me…”

“Ah, wait,” he called out, just as she turned on her heel. “Have you ever dreamed of a broad river? I always have this dream where I’m fishing as a tattered boatman helps those on the verge of death cross to the riverbank on the other side. For whatever reason, I heard a voice call me from behind today, wailing that running a nation was difficult business. Just as I woke with the thought that I must offer advice as a leader, you appeared before me, Princess Falanya.”

“Umm…” So was he saying he had heard her and Nanaki’s conversation while dreaming?

He definitely shouldn’t be dreaming about crossing any rivers. Those were bad omens.

The man continued, “So, Princess Falanya, do you understand the difference between a person and a citizen?”

She hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to respond seriously or force her way out of the situation. She went with the former.

“Aren’t they the same?”

“They’re not.” His answer was surprisingly curt. “People do not belong to a nation. They have no rights, but in return, they have no obligations, while citizens have both. So I have a follow-up question. What makes a person a citizen?”

His voice took on a new intelligence. Falanya knew she couldn’t just give any random answer, but nothing was coming to mind.

Falanya chose to respond in a different way. “I’m not sure. What’s the answer?”

“Laws,” he replied. “The laws created by a nation shove its people into a mold and recast them. Through that process, they become creatures known as

‘citizens.’ Laws must be observed. Bending, breaking, or otherwise abusing these laws to shake the foundation on which citizens are built is considered a serious act of betrayal.”

For just a moment, Falanya saw a furious passion in the man’s eyes.

“There are no exceptions, even royalty. There *can’t* be any exceptions… Someday, you’ll rule your own land and find yourself in the position of protecting your citizens, Princess Falanya. May you never forget the weight of law.” He broke into a sudden smile. “That is all I have to say. My apologies for keeping you for so long.”

“Oh, please don’t mention it…”

Falanya shook her head. Until just a short while ago, she saw him as some eccentric person. Her opinion of him hadn’t changed, but he had piqued her interest.

“May I ask your name?”

He clapped his hands. “I haven’t introduced myself. How rude of me. My name is—”

“Keskinel!” Someone was shouting from the courtyard entrance.

When Falanya turned around, she found Lowellmina.

“What are you discussing with my guest?”

“Good day to you, Princess Lowellmina. You’re looking fine on this day.”

The man—Keskinel—bowed. The gesture was indescribably elegant for his shabby appearance.

“I’m not fine at all. Please don’t approach Princess Falanya. She’ll catch your strange quirks.” Lowellmina tugged Falanya away, embracing her. “Princess Falanya, this man didn’t say anything weird to you, did he? He loves to prey on honest people and spread his strange ideas.”

“N-no, though I can understand why you think that way…” Falanya said, squirming in Lowellmina’s arms.

“Princess Lowellmina. Me? Odd? I’m always serious, and I have an honest heart. I only speak to others because I love to talk. It’s like everyone is avoiding me like the plague lately, so I admit I thought Princess Falanya was a precious listener. Anyway, don’t you think it’s horrible that the guards beg to stop after we’ve only talked for six hours?”

“Okay, okay. By the way, I spotted the officials looking for you. They are in a much worse mood than me, so I suggest you hurry back to them.”

“Hmph. That’s too bad.” He turned on his heel. “You know, anger and

sadness stir the heart. If my heart were an instrument, I would ask you all to strum it more gently. But I guess I'll never get through to you. I shall take my leave… Ah, my name is Keskinel, Princess Falanya."

The elusive man walked away, marching to the sound of his own drum.

"Phew. The nuisance is finally gone," Lowellmina said with a nod that suggested they could now rest easy.

"Um, Princess Lowellmina? Who *was* that person? He seems like a civil officer, but…"

He didn't act like one, and he seemed to know Lowellmina.

Lowellmina guessed what she was thinking. "He's a civil officer. I don't want to say this too loud, but he's one of the highest-ranking officers in the nation."

"By that…you mean…"

"That's *Prime Minister* Keskinel," Lowellmina stated as she looked in the direction where he had just left. "At the moment, he's the one pillar supporting the Empire."

"The prime minister…" Falanya's eyes widened, especially when she remembered his eccentric behavior. She tilted her head. "…That weirdo?"

"Yeah. That weirdo." Lowellmina crossed her arms. "He's odd but brilliant. He wouldn't be prime minister if he didn't have something going for him. That said, he really isn't right in the head…" She chuckled dryly. "Let's save this conversation for later. Didn't you have some business with me? Of course, I'd be delighted if you've simply come for a pot of tea."

Her encounter with the weirdo had temporarily wiped her schedule for the day from her mind, but Falanya hadn't come to appreciate his eccentricities.

"There's something I wish to discuss with you, Princess Lowellmina."

"Then let us find a room to converse in. I already have tea and biscuits prepared."

The two nodded and walked toward the palace.

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To be perfectly frank, Demetrio's army couldn't have been in a worse position.

He had about five thousand remaining soldiers in Bellida, no supplies, and no morale. It took everything he had just to keep public order in the city

from deteriorating. Fighting against Bardloche and Manfred was a pipe dream.

As if that wasn't enough, his people were rebelling. Even those who had managed to stick by Demetrio for all this time weren't focused on the battle. They needed to put out fires in their own domain.

On top of that, Prime Minister Keskinel had threatened to put a stop to him. If Demetrio neglected his domain for any longer, the Imperial army would mobilize to confiscate it. Even if the prince wanted to double-down, resistance was not an option.

"…Is this how it ends for me?" Demetrio laughed at himself in his private room, boozed up. The room reeked of alcohol. Near his hand was a toppled glass.

"As if I'll just take that. There's gotta to be some way…to make me Emperor… That's what was expected of me…" Demetrio murmured incoherently.

Though he'd drowned himself in spirits, something burned in his eyes.

Things were looking grim for him. His soldiers had been whispering among themselves, asking when they should desert the troops, if they should join Bardloche or Manfred, and if they should bring Demetrio's head with them.

He'd surrounded himself with his trusted confidants, but who knew how long they would stick by him? They wouldn't save him, even when he was backed into a corner, because *he* hadn't saved *them*. Demetrio was facing his consequences.

"—Pardon me. Oh, someone's having a rough time." After a few raps, the door opened.

Wein stood there before him.

"It's you… I'm in a bad mood. If you've got business, come back later."

"Come on. Don't be like that. You were talking about how something is expected of you. Care to elaborate?"

Despite Demetrio's best efforts to drive him out, Wein parked himself in a chair in front of him. The Imperial prince glared at him, but it was apparent that nothing he said would get this intruder to leave.

He gave up and clicked his tongue. "…I'm just rambling. I was told to become Emperor. So now I have to fulfill that expectation. That's all."

"…You have to be Emperor because it's expected of you? You make it sound like you're being forced into the role."

"It's the truth. You think anyone would look at me now and think I've got a handle on this?" Demetrio had on a mocking smile, perhaps because of the alcohol. "I was born the eldest son, so I'm obviously supposed to be Emperor. But look at reality. My stupid brothers got the better of me. My army is destroyed. My people are rebelling. Dammit! Why?! I have to be Emperor, and yet…!"

Demetrio's voice got hoarse as he barked in rage and resentment. Wein stared at him, his expression neither indifferent nor crafty. It was surprisingly compassionate.

"…I get it. You've been placed under a horrible curse."

"What? A curse…?"

"Prince Demetrio. A word of friendly advice from one member of royalty to another: Humans rarely have just one motive. For better or worse, our actions can be perceived in many ways. That's why people can just pick and choose the one that suits their needs, as long as they can agree with the outcome."

It didn't feel as if Wein was mocking him. He sounded sincere, but it wasn't enough to move Demetrio.

"…I have no clue what you're talking about. Forget it. Just leave."

"That's unfortunate. We're not done yet. We have bigger things to talk about."

"What now? I don't have time to deal with…" Demetrio cut himself off, realizing something and sobering up slightly.

Why didn't I think of it before? There is only one thing that this guy should be doing right now.

Wein should have been an outsider. Whatever his motives, he had joined with Demetrio to take down the other two princes.

The outcome spoke for itself. Demetrio's faction was going to be defeated. It was inevitable. All Wein could do was find favor with either the middle or the youngest prince. His best bet was presenting one of them with Demetrio's head.

And his *attitude*. He was so brazen. He must have planned to separate Demetrio from his men to abduct him. No one would hear Demetrio, even if he called out, and his drunken legs would never manage to bring him to safety.

"…Who are you planning on bringing my head to?" Demetrio barked, filled with rage, feeling betrayed and cursing himself for his own stupidity.

He was just thinking he could talk long enough to buy himself time to come up with an escape plan when…

Wein tilted his head. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, don’t play dumb! You were going to offer my head to my brothers so you can patch up the relationship between Natra and the Empire!”

Surprise crept across Wein’s face—and then he held his ribs as he burst into laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Great idea! —Maybe for Plan B!” Wein chuckled, spreading a map on the desk before them. “*This* is why I’m here. Everything is set. If you’re still up for it, you’ve got a chance to grab the throne.”

“What…?!” Demetrio halfway rose from his chair.

He still had a chance? Even in this situation? He was ready to jump headfirst toward this beacon of light, but he had some suspicions.

“Wait…you say there’s a chance, but what do you plan on doing? Most of my soldiers want to return home. I imagine some have already deserted their stations. I have less than a thousand soldiers left. Are you suggesting I should blindly charge at my brothers’ armies?”

“Nope. Those thousand men can go home with the rest.”

Demetrio jolted. “So…you don’t intend to fight? And you still think we can win?”

“We can,” Wein replied confidently, “but the road won’t be easy. Whether we sink or swim will depend on you, Prince Demetrio.”

“……” Demetrio hadn’t the slightest idea what he meant.

How were they supposed to win? He should have waved this off as nonsense, but he didn’t get the sense that Wein was lying or trying to mess with him. The truth was that the prince of Natra had no reason to lie by this point.

Does he actually think there is a way for me to win…?

If that meant he still had an option…

“…I’m done hesitating. I’ll drink your poison,” Demetrio said with fury in his eyes. “Use whatever methods you must. Secure me victory, Wein Salema Arbalest.”

“Leave it to me. I guarantee you’ll be going through that baptism, Prince Demetrio.”

As Bardloche and Manfred prepared for their battle, Demetrio and Wein started to gear up for their last chance to win this thing.

Who would be victorious? The clock ticked ever closer to the moment that would go down in history.

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Bardloche's and Manfred's armies.

They faced their enemy on the same field outside Nalthia where Demetrio's forces had failed two weeks prior.

Their troops each sported around ten thousand soldiers. Bardloche's army was hot off the heels of its victory against Demetrio, while Manfred's touted justice, backed by the patriots.

Public opinion would state that Bardloche was the clear winner. He had proved himself in the last battle, and morale was high, though these back-to-back fights were taking a toll.

The reason why Bardloche had not gone through with the ceremonial baptism was to stop Manfred from using his moral high ground to justify an attack. The middle prince had padded their supplies from local merchants and aristocrats, hoping to hop on the victory bandwagon, though it wasn't as much as the patriots could provide. They were more than ready for a lengthy battle.

"We appear to be at a disadvantage. What do you think, Strang?" Manfred asked in the main camp before a row of commanders.

"Our soldiers might be a little flighty, compared to our opponents, who just got an ego boost from defeating Demetrio's army. To acclimate our soldiers to battle, I suggest dedicating the first day solely to defense," Strang replied.

One of the vassals spoke up. "Isn't that approach a bit too passive?"

"The battle has only just begun. We can't afford to burn out. Or our minds and bodies won't last the fight. I assume the other side will keep it light for the first day."

The vassal groaned in dissatisfaction. Manfred turned to him and smiled.

"If you're so eager to see blood, I would be happy to put you on the front lines."

"P-please show some mercy, Your Highness."

Laughter rang across the headquarters. The corners of Manfred's mouth

curled into a smile, and he addressed all present.

“Strang has devised our plan for victory, but our enemy is a tough one. For the best results, we must find the right moment to cut off their morale and stamina. Be careful out there.”

“‘“Understood!”’” The commanders bowed and left to man their stations.

As Strang had anticipated, the first day of the battle was played out with more caution than expected of a war of this scale.

Arrows had been shot, but not close enough to cause critical damage. Cavalrymen skimmed the enemy’s perimeter to deliver blows. Foot soldiers limited their opponent’s movements while maintaining their distance. They were appraising the enemy’s skills, battle tactics, and slips in their formation.

The sun set on the first day. This battle was over for the day. Both armies withdrew to their campsites to rest.

“Two hundred casualties today. Three hundred wounded, all light. The soldiers should be able to participate in our fight tomorrow.”

“Good work,” Bardloche said to his subordinate inside his tent and faced the leaders in front of him. “Damage is minimal, as expected. At this rate, we shouldn’t have any problems tomorrow.”

The leaders nodded.

“We picked up on their tricks today. Tomorrow, we’ll crush them.”

“In terms of skill, they aren’t much different from Demetrio’s forces.”

“No match for us.”

Spirits were high. The leaders seemed certain of this outcome.

Bardloche stared at them coolly. “You’re right. Based on today, we’ve all but won. But don’t forget that those who let their guard down on the battlefield are the first to die.”

His words failed to reach their ears.

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re being too humble, Your Highness.”

“We’re not lowering our guards. We’re just stating the truth.”

The leaders mouthed off to their master, continuing to make comments rather than put a stop to their conversation. They were acting especially arrogant that night. Manfred’s army was the last hurdle, and they were surprisingly unresponsive. If they overcame this, their leader would become Emperor. This had padded their egos.

"…Lorencio." Bardloche turned to the only one watching the scene in silence. He thought the old man might be able to do something, but Lorencio shook his head. It was futile.

"…That's enough for today. You're all dismissed." Bardloche realized this would be a waste of time and sent everyone away, including Lorencio.

As soon as he was alone, he thought, *We can beat Manfred at this rate. Even I know that. But something's been bothering me. The enemy is probably thinking the same thing.*

The thing that was bothering him was Prince Demetrio. The truth was, Bardloche had lost track of his movements about a week prior.

He was spotted returning to his domain with his soldiers, but then they vanished into thin air. He must still be working with Prince Wein.

If Demetrio were by himself, Bardloche would have assumed he'd been betrayed by his soldiers and assassinated. But since Wein had disappeared along with him, that was wishful thinking.

I can't help but think he's got another plan in the works. And if that's the case, I imagine he'll butt into our battle at some point.

He had informed his subordinates of Demetrio's disappearance, but none felt it was any cause for alarm. They asked what Demetrio could possibly do without any soldiers. Bardloche shared that sentiment to a certain extent.

Am I just overthinking things, or…?

Night grew darker, and his question went unanswered.

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It was the dawn of the second day. Unlike the day before, Bardloche's army was going in on the offensive.

Arrows rained down on them, foot soldiers bashing into the enemy, and horsemen storming through weak spots. The battlefield was filled with angry cries, agonized screams, and corpses.

Manfred's army held their ground, which came as a surprise to Bardloche's soldiers. If one took a tally of the second day, it would be clear that they suffered as little damage as the day before.

The reason for this was that both parties had benched their main forces. Bardloche's attacks were met with defensive strategies and shrewd tactics orchestrated by Manfred.

This continued into the third and the fourth days. Bardloche was the one

getting frustrated.

"Your Highness, their defenses are more difficult to disrupt than we anticipated. At this rate, it will be hard to break through their vanguard."

"And we'll just be wasting our valuable resources. I would like to avoid a war of attrition with Prince Manfred and the patriots who support him, if possible."

"We ought to mobilize our main forces and settle this."

Each of the vassals made it clear that they were hoping to end this battle as quickly as possible.

These war veterans had a wealth of experience, and with their long-term physical and mental stamina, they could stay focused for ten, even twenty days on the battlefield. However, now that they were so close to having a new Emperor after three years, the leaders were starting to get tunnel vision.

"Hmph…" Bardloche groaned.

Should he raise his voice to have them settle down? But they had been hostile when addressing the issue with the baptism. He might have acted differently if these were times of peace. Right now, he couldn't risk fissures forming in his inner circle.

Plus, he'd reserved his main forces so they could deal with Demetrio and Wein whenever the two decided to show up, but there was no sign of them. He had planned on being vigilant, but this might be his opportunity to rethink his strategy.

Bardloche arrived at a decision as he looked out at all of them. "…Fine. Tomorrow we'll fight with our entire army."

The leaders rejoiced.

"Yes! Fantastic decision!"

"That should teach them about Your Highness's authority!"

"Well, let's prepare straightaway!"

The leaders were certain of their victory, rushing to prepare for the next day. Just as Bardloche was sensing the precariousness of their situation…

"Pardon me!" A messenger flew into the tent. He began shouting before Bardloche even had the chance to ask what happened.

"Our soldiers are falling ill! —The food donated to us has been poisoned!"

Surprise rocked the tent.

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"…Did it work?"

On the morning of the fifth day, Strang looked across the way at Bardloche's army and replied in a quiet voice, "The plan was a success, Your Highness."

"Yeah, I can see there are visibly fewer soldiers out there."

Only the day before, both armies had suffered two thousand casualties. If nothing changed, they would have gone into this day with approximately eight thousand soldiers each…except Bardloche had no more than five thousand at the moment.

"You surprised me when you first explained your plan. I never thought you'd suggest mixing poison in the food from their supporters." Manfred wasn't being sarcastic. He was in awe.

Poison had been used on battlefields forever, starting with laced arrows, but there was no precedent of using it on such a large scale.

Strang shook his head at his master's praise. "It was nothing. I just mimicked a friend."

"Man-to-man, you sure know how to pick 'em."

"Yeah. I picked this terrible friend of mine," Strang replied. "After Bardloche's battle with Demetrio, it was inevitable that his army would be low on supplies. The locals would want to ride on his coattails to victory, so I knew they were going to supply him with their goods."

"So you swiped a few crates, laced them with poison, and handed them to the enemy camp. You knew Bardloche's forces would need it so bad that they wouldn't check closely."

"Precisely," Strang said with a nod. "Three thousand soldiers absent from the battlefield. I bet only two thousand are incapacitated. None will die. The rest will be concerned about their own health or tending to the sick."

"I see. Couldn't you have used a stronger poison?"

"If it was too strong, the effects would have been instant, which means they'd be quicker to realize their food has been tampered with. Less damage that way, you see. Plus, the dead require nothing, while the living will laugh and cry and eat and excrete."

"So you're saying keeping them alive is more of a hassle."

"Yes. We carry the weight of the dead in our hearts and the weight of the living on our backs." Strang shrugged. "And it isn't realistic to plan to procure enough lethal poison to use in battle. Not just because of production, testing, maintenance, and cost. Its uses are too limited."

“I guess, now that you mention it. So what else can your choice of poison do?”

“It’s originally from a plant used for dyeing clothing, but when it’s injected over a long period of time or in great quantities, it can wreak havoc in the body. I mixed it into their hay or ground it into fine powder to add to their food.”

The tactics could be called unjust. Demetrio would have rejected such a proposal on instinct, and Bardloche would have turned it down out of pride, but Manfred accepted the plans to use poison and incite rebellion without hesitation. As the third son, he knew he couldn’t afford to be picky.

“So what now?”

“We go on the offensive. We’ll secure victory while the enemy has lost their composure.”

“…And once we’ve got this wrapped up, I can be baptized and officially become Emperor.”

“Don’t forget that you’ll let my hometown become independent after your ascension.”

“Of course. I always reward my vassals for a job well done,” Manfred replied amicably, but Strang noticed his eyes weren’t smiling. “As future Emperor, I better go inspire my men.”

His steps light, Manfred walked away. Strang watched from behind before letting out a small sigh.

“It won’t be easy, even if things go well… Anyway, I should focus on what’s in front of me.”

He stared out at the battlefield once more.

The final day of the battle had only just begun.

Manfred’s army had done a complete one-eighty from their original strategy, launching a powerfully aggressive attack.

Bardloche’s soldiers had dwindled because of the poison, but their morale had taken an even bigger hit. They were worried about their fallen comrades and their own health, which dulled their blades and made them hesitate.

Manfred’s army had used this as a golden opportunity to take revenge against their enemy, for all the violence inflicted on them. They were

seemingly winning on all fronts.

Bardloche's men might curse them for being spineless and unethical, but they couldn't stop the onslaught. From the perspective of Manfred's soldiers, Bardloche had betrayed their mutual agreement by attempting to go through with the baptism. What's more, Manfred had indoctrinated his troops, making them believe they were defenders of justice who were cleansing the Empire of vermin.

Frankly, Bardloche's forces were facing quite a dilemma.

"Your Highness! The front line for the second unit has been overtaken!"

"The messengers are being targeted! We can't get a read on the situation!"

"We can't stop the enemy's central forces! Your Highness…!"

The nightmarish reports were unrelenting. Bardloche had held the advantage for the first four days of the battle. Anyone would have assumed this pattern would continue, but this was the reality of the situation. Everything had been turned on its head in the span of a single night.

"Who knew this would happen…?"

The thought of defeat flashed in his mind.

He should have been bolder from the beginning—should have been warier about the donated supplies. Should have. Could have. Would have. He couldn't stop himself from thinking about these possibilities, even though he knew it was pointless.

"Your Highness, please get a grip!" Next to him, Lorencio had on a look of agony. "Now that it's come to this, we should make a temporary retreat…!"

"A retreat? And where are we supposed to go?!"

"To Nalthia. If we lock ourselves away in the city, we will be out of their reach."

"Hngh…!" Bardloche glared at Lorencio. "Nalthia is sacred land! Are you telling me I should use it as a shield?!"

"We have no other methods at our disposal if we wish to recover from this…!"

Bardloche *could* withdraw into his own domain. Manfred wouldn't dare come near his territory. That meant that Manfred would undergo the ceremonial baptism and become Emperor, however. To Bardloche, this was basically the same as accepting defeat.

"I beg of you. Please listen to me!"

It would take a while for their army to recover. Using Nalthia as a shield was the only way that they could buy enough time. Bardloche knew this.

It took him several seconds to come to the difficult decision.

"…We're retreating to Nalthia!"

Strang immediately noticed movement in Bardloche's headquarters.

"So he's chosen survival over dignity…"

Strang had thought through the possibility of the military man accepting a valiant death in battle, but he'd apparently cared more about being a prince. Either way, Strang was prepared.

"Send out the spare cavalrymen. Attack the main camp."

"Yes, sir!"

"Send a messenger to all units. The enemy is planning to withdraw. Strike them from behind."

The messenger went to inform the army.

As Strang had mentioned, the main camp was retreating to Nalthia, and the rest of Bardloche's army was beginning to fall back. Manfred's forces would pursue them from behind…

This did not escape Glen's notice.

"All hands, follow me!"

This is our chance, Glen thought, raising his voice and steering his horse forward.

"Captain?!" cried one of his subordinates, falling back with the rest of their comrades.

Even more surprised were Manfred's soldiers. They were thinking that they would close in on their retreating enemy, only to find themselves being chased.

It was so sudden, they couldn't prepare fast enough. They were sent flying by the cavalrymen.

"C-Captain! Please wait!"

Glen was charging farther inside after tearing through their defenses. His panicked subordinates were hot on his heels.

"Captain! This is reckless! The rest of our troops are escaping!"

“We won’t be able to get past their defenses by ourselves! We’ll be in enemy territory!”

Five hundred soldiers followed after their captain. Several thousand enemies surrounded them. Glen barked with laughter, though his approach seemed impulsive.

“No. Their attention is scattered now! It’s our chance to strike!”

As Glen had said, Manfred’s defenses weren’t nearly as tight as before. If they could break through, they’d arrive at the innermost part of the enemy’s stronghold. It was here Glen would find his friend and his friend’s master—Strang and Manfred.

“We’re diving right into the heart of the enemy! —I’ll capture the youngest prince and lead us to victory!”

“He got us…!” Strang started to sweat, watching Glen blow past their forces.

Manfred’s army was inherently weaker than Bardloche’s troops, but a sense of purpose alone had united them to endure their vicious attacks. With all soldiers on the defensive, their battle formation had been rock solid.

But they had started to attack on this day. This switch from defense to offense and Bardloche’s defeat had wiped the thought of guarding the front line out of their minds.

And that was exactly when Glen made his counterattack.

Manfred’s soldiers didn’t stand a chance against their battle prowess. In fact, Strang was watching Glen’s unit grow ever closer. He swiftly issued orders to his subordinates.

“Arrange three rows of armed soldiers in front of that enemy unit! And fast!”

“U-understood!”

“Where is our closest cavalry?!”

“The cavalry is already pursuing the enemy to its headquarters! We would need time to call them back!”

“Tch…!”

Manfred’s faction was made of new money, which meant they were ambitious. They were desperate to get one step ahead of their neighbor. Obviously, they would never miss the golden opportunity to chase a retreating army.

“The armed forces are ready!”

“All right, then. With this—”

After stopping the enemy cavalrymen in their tracks, Strang would mobilize the surrounding soldiers to crush them.

“You think this is gonna stop me?!”

Glen’s attack blew away three rows of Manfred’s best-equipped soldiers, however.

“Th-the enemy is advancing!”

“…Evacuate Prince Manfred to the rear!”

There was no longer any way of stopping Glen and his men from reaching the main camp. They would arrive at any moment.

Strang understood this. “All hands to your stations! Prepare to release all traps! We’ll engage the enemy here!”

“Captain! I see the main camp!”

It had been some time since they’d advanced, hacking away at their enemy. Glen’s forces had caught sight of the stronghold.

“Awesome! We’re almost there!”

“We got this!”

Even the soldiers in their midst who doubted Glen were starting to get a boost in morale. They couldn’t even imagine the accolades that awaited them if they managed to capture the enemy commander, especially when it seemed like they would lose.

“No one let down their guard! It’s probably loaded with traps! This is where the real battle begins!”

The subordinates calmed their hearts.

Just then, Glen noticed something. Standing at the center of the camp was a single man. Their eyes met.

Glen shouted, “—I’m here, Strang!”

“—You’re here, Glen.” Strang felt himself smiling, oddly enough.

Maybe it was because he’d seen his friend acting like normal, even though they were at war. But this was where it ended. There was no room for friendship.

To think you'd tip the scales in a battle that was seemingly over. I'm as impressed by your strength as ever, Glen, Strang thought.

To think your genius would drive us into one hell of a corner. You're a force to be reckoned with, Strang, Glen thought.

They then came to their simultaneous conclusion: *That's why I must take you down here—!*

Glen, approaching. Strang, expectant.

Would Strang's resourcefulness capsize Glen? Or would Glen's strength in battle surpass him? The moment of truth was coming ever closer, rocking heaven and earth—

"—Drop your weapons at once! This is an official proclamation of a cease-fire by order of the Empire!"

From the sidelines came news at impeccable timing.

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"A cease-fire?! What's going on?!"

"What?! According to who?!"

From all sides of the battlefield came cries of confusion and anger.

This was the momentous fight to decide the next Emperor, after all. Obviously, everyone would have something to say if a third party came to rain on their parade, just as they were about to resolve things. Coming up on top, Manfred's army was trying to continue their attacks.

…Until they came to a certain realization.

"H-hey, look at that…!"

Soldiers were waiting on standby next to the battlefield. It wasn't their presence itself that surprised both armies. It was the flag they were touting.

It belonged to neither the eldest, nor the middle, nor the youngest prince.

"—That's the flag of the Emperor."

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A holy symbol in the Empire. If anyone mishandled it, their head went flying. It wasn't the kind of thing that could be waved around to deceive others.

"That means those are the Imperial forces…who directly serve the Emperor!"

"Wh-whoa, this is bad! Drop your weapons!"

Even after death, the Emperor's authority held strong. As soon as both sides realized a cease-fire had been declared under his flag, they were quick to abandon their arms.

"B-but His Majesty passed away a while ago."

"Yeah. Who could mobilize his forces in his stead…?"

Though the soldiers thought long and hard, they couldn't figure it out. Some of the officers knew, however. There was one person with the right to govern in the absence of the Emperor.

It was a messenger dispatched from this Imperial force who revealed the truth.

"Prime Minister Keskinel shall hold a meeting in Nalthia! Required to attend are the representatives of both parties, Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred!"

The sound of clashing swords ceased. Commotion started to ripple through the soldiers.

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The atmosphere in the room couldn't get any worse.

The source was obvious: Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred were glaring at each other, ready to explode at any moment. Plus, they both had guards standing at attention behind them, who seemed eager to fight as soon as their masters gave the order. The air was heavy.

"…What rotten timing. My victory has gone out the window," Manfred said suddenly. "You should be grateful, Bardloche. Keskinel is the only reason you still have your head."

"…You better watch your mouth, Manfred," Bardloche barked. "You have to stoop low to feel proud of a dirty win. And against fellow Imperial citizens, no less. You don't have a shred of decency, do you?"

"Ha-ha-ha. So you're saying using poison is unfair, but swords are fair play? That works *so* conveniently for army men. You got screwed because

you're not very principled, you know."

They were shooting daggers at each other. The tiniest slight might invite another war between them.

The door opened. "—Pardon my tardiness."

Prime Minister Keskinel appeared. Several soldiers followed behind him, and Bardloche groaned when he saw one of them.

"…You joined Keskinel, General Silas?"

Silas. A commander in the Imperial army. An aristocratic Flahm who once had housed Prince Wein and was currently entertaining his sister, Falanya. He smiled.

"Of course not, Your Highness. But I thought it was a shame that the Imperial troops who served His Majesty had no general to direct them. So I offered to command the soldiers, and no more. Please do not worry."

"You really helped me out, General Silas. I can come up with the budget to support the troops, but I don't know how to deploy them. Armies are so strange. So rigid on the outside, but fluid when working from within. Like a chrysalis. Did you know there's viscous liquid inside them? The caterpillar dissolves into a liquid before transforming into a butterfly. Can we say that a butterfly and caterpillar remain the same entity after the process? I mean, they're only the same on the inside. Everything else—its shape, its appearance—make it seem like a new existence. Oh, and they taste different, I recall."

"Sir Keskinel. The princes are waiting. Perhaps we could save this fascinating discussion for later?"

"Oh dear, my apologies. Remind me to come back to this." Keskinel bowed his head to Silas before turning his attention back to the princes.

"…So, Keskinel, care to explain?" Manfred asked. "Why did you get in my way? Weren't you supposed to be a neutral party in our fight for succession?"

"The word 'neutral' is a bit misleading. I just respect you all as the sons of the Emperor. But there was an incident that I can't excuse, which is why I stepped in. I assume you know what I am referring to, princes?"

"The rebellion in stupid Demetrio's territory," Bardloche replied with a sneer. "He abandoned the people that he was supposed to be protecting. How pathetic."

"Seriously. He makes me ashamed to be a prince," Manfred agreed, despite being the one responsible for it in the first place.

Bardloche went on, “Well, what else could you expect? He might be a prince of the Empire, but his mom came from some random little country. He’s an insult to the royal line.”

“He was pretty attached to her apparently. Even the casual mention of her name sends him into a flying rage. Maybe the people are rebelling *because* he’s their leader.”

They were ruthless to Demetrio in his absence. Well, they would have done so even if he were around. Their older brother was going to drop out of the race. The two were in agreement there.

Keskinel turned to them. “I am relieved to hear you say that. Now we will be able to settle matters peacefully.”

“Huh? What are you trying to say?”

“I have come here today to tell Your Highnesses something.” Keskinel took a breath before continuing. “—Your people are currently rebelling in both your domains. I would like you both to hurry back and put a stop to it.”

““What…?!”” All present opened their eyes in shock.

“A r-rebellion?! In my territory?!”

“What’re you talking about?! That’s ridiculous!”

“It’s the truth. It seems that reports are coming in, since you recruited so many people with you to the battlefield. Also—”

Just as Keskinel was about to continue, they heard heavy footsteps stamping outside the room. The door burst open. Bardloche and Manfred gaped at the people before them.

“Looks like everyone’s here.”

“You can’t even walk in without causing a scene.”

“Hmph. Who cares? It’s just my stupid brothers.”

“Goodness. I love to see that your brotherly bond is strong.”

Sniffing haughtily was the Imperial Prince of Earthworld, Demetrio.

Standing next to him in exasperation was the Second Imperial Princess, Lowellmina.

And one step behind both of them was the crown prince of Natra, Wein, smiling wryly.

The three perpetrators of disorder had entered the scene.

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“What the hell is going on…?!”

Bardloche was visibly flustered. His guards were the same way, and no one was following the situation.

However, one person—Manfred—was different. As soon as he saw Wein, his mind sorted out the possibilities.

There was rebellion in Demetrio's territory. Keskinel's interference. Demetrio and Wein's vanishing act. And the revolt currently in his own domain.

That could only mean one thing—

"…You *didn't* stop the rebellion, Prince Wein," Manfred said, voice trembling.

He didn't want to believe it. It had to be a joke. However, Manfred knew it to be true.

"And that's not all. You *spread* the fighting in Demetrio's territory—all so it could reach ours!"

"Wh-what…?!"

Bardloche and Manfred glared at Wein, but he took this in stride.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Wein said with a brazen grin. "I'm only here to watch from the sidelines. Right, Prince Demetrio?"

"Exactly. False accusations only make you look bad, Manfred," Demetrio added, flashing a relaxed smile. This was all the proof that Manfred needed to confirm his hunch was correct.

—Who knew walking poison could be so lethal?

Even though Demetrio knew everything, he still couldn't stop himself from shuddering.

A rebellion in your territory was like setting yourself on fire. Anyone would instinctively put out the flames.

…Everyone except Wein. For him, extinguishing these flames meant losing. When he realized Demetrio's territory was adjacent to his brothers', he used the eldest prince's few remaining soldiers to incite the rebellion in his domain to spread it to the other territories. He didn't want to put out the flames. He wanted to take the two princes down with him.

"…So let me guess," Bardloche began through his teeth. "We don't have time to argue over who gets the throne, since the people are rebelling in our lands. You're telling us that these battles meant nothing and that we need to pack it up and go home…!" He sounded furious.

This wasn't the truth, however.

"You're wrong."

The reality was far worse than what Bardloche had imagined.

"The only ones leaving are *you, my stupid little brothers*," Demetrio announced.

Huh? Manfred and Bardloche looked at him, brows furrowed.

"After all, we've ready suppressed the revolt in my territory."

""What…?!"" The eyes of the two younger princes grew large, and they looked at Keskinel, panicked.

He nodded slowly. "As Prince Demetrio says, we've confirmed that the turmoil in his domain is quieting."

"That's impossible!" Manfred yelled. "The uprising got big enough to spill into our territories, right?! Even if Demetrio's faction tried to restore order, he lost his men and supplies in the last battle! If he only had the foresight to deal with it when he had the time! I mean, he didn't have any… people or resources…to spare…"

He trailed off before snapping his head up to look at Lowellmina smiling placidly next to Wein and Demetrio. At that moment, he understood everything.

"Lowellmina, you—!"

"Your instincts tell you right, Manfred," Lowellmina replied, placing a hand on her chest as if she were in pain. "Of course, we can't blame citizens who got caught up in the rebellion. And those who sparked it aren't evil either. You know I've been worried that this infighting will have its victims. Wouldn't the patriots want to bring them salvation?"

Lowellmina continued, "Fortunately, Demetrio granted us unrestricted movement within his domain and the right to pass proper punishment upon those who participated in the rebellion. For the sake of our Imperial citizens, I called upon my patriots to restore order."

Wein was the one to propose this plan and contact Lowellmina through Falanya. That was how Demetrio stabilized his domain and Lowellmina boosted her reputation as a member of the patriots.

If Ninym had been present, she would have rolled her eyes at Wein and Lowellmina.

In the beginning, Lowellmina had caught Wein in her own schemes, forcing him to side with Demetrio. But Wein got his payback, turning this on her and raising the stakes.

They had been in the middle of scheming how to one-up each other when they realized Demetrio's faction might lose to Manfred's plan. So they

decided to join forces.

This had nothing to do with their own feelings, whether it be rage or resentment. They were acting in self-interest and self-interest alone.

"Well, I'm sure you get the picture now. Neither of you will be staying behind to experience the ceremonial baptism. I am," Demetrio declared.

Even if Demetrio hadn't dropped into this room, even if Keskinel hadn't informed them that order had been restored in the eldest prince's territory, the other two princes would have been in a tight spot. Neither could leave Nalthia if they wanted to prevent each other from becoming Emperor, but their land was still going up in flames. They would have to continue glaring at each other, feeling that the fire beneath their feet was climbing up their bodies.

"…Do you think I'll just sit back and let you?!" Bardloche asked, slamming a fist on the desk. "Do you even hear yourself?! All of you! You think your plan will decide the next Emperor?! As if! I'm not having it!" Bardloche looked at his younger brother. "Manfred! Tell me you aren't going to put up with this either!"

"…Of course not. I don't agree with it at all."

Demetrio scoffed at them. "Oh? If you can't accept it, what are you going to do?"

"…If Manfred and I join forces…you know how much we'll overpower you."

Bardloche's hand went for the sword at his side. As soon as everyone saw this, they moved into battle positions. In any time, place, or occasion, it was natural to physically vanquish an enemy when logic didn't work out.

Wein spoke up. "I wonder who's gonna get the blame."

He didn't seem like he was even in the same room as them. He sounded so causal.

Lowellmina humored him. "What are you talking about, Prince Wein?"

"I guess I was wondering which of the two princes will be responsible for the deaths of you, me, Prince Demetrio, and Sir Keskinel."

She considered this for a moment before breaking into a tiny smile. "Bardloche, of course."

"Is it so obvious?"

"Yes. Even if they shake on some agreement here, it won't take Manfred long to devise a plan to pin the blame on Bardloche."

Bardloche and Manfred gulped.

Lowellmina continued, “This would work in Manfred’s favor. Though he feigned confidence, he *had* failed to stop Bardloche on the battlefield. With time, Bardloche’s forces will recover from the poison and regain their strength. If they fight again, Manfred will certainly lose.”

“So you’re saying he wouldn’t pass up on the chance to foist the stigma of killing the rest of the Imperial family, a prince of an ally nation, and the prime minister onto Bardloche?”

“Precisely.” Lowellmina looked over at Bardloche. “But isn’t that only natural? I mean, Bardloche went behind Manfred’s back and tried to get the baptism. The betrayer often becomes the betrayed.”

Bardloche bit his lip. In an instant, the air of cooperation between the two brothers dissipated.

Manfred spat more than spoke. “…You’ve got a nasty personality.”

“Ouch. That’s not true at all. Right, Prince Wein?”

“Oh, no comment.”

“Pardon?” Lowellmina poked Wein’s arm.

“…Can you please wrap it up?” Keskinel asked slowly. “If Your Highnesses return to your domains and restore order, I shall do nothing. If you remain here and continue to quarrel, however, I will deem you unfit to govern your lands and use my authority to confiscate them.”

A heavy silence descended upon the room. Not long after, Manfred spoke up.

“…Fine, I’ll return home.”

“Manfred?!” Bardloche was the most surprised by this development. “Are you serious?! You know what will happen if you retreat now, right?!”

“What am I supposed to do? Glare at you here while my land burns to the ground? I’ll pass. If that happens, I won’t be able to get any more chances.”

“Ngh…but…!”

“Sorry. It’s hard for me to change my mind after I’ve made it up. If you’ll excuse me.” Manfred stood up from his seat. “You two got the better of me this time, but don’t think it will happen again.”

Manfred left Wein and Lowellmina with these words, exiting the room with his guards. Now on his own, Bardloche sat in agonizing silence for some time.

“…I’ll withdraw, too,” he muttered, his voice hoarse.

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Both armies stationed outside Nalthia were confused by their princes' orders to withdraw. Few resisted.

Their attitudes, however, changed once they heard about the rebellions breaking out in their domains. It wouldn't mean much if their leader became the Emperor if it came at the cost of their land burning to the ground. The backlash died down as they came to grips with retreat.

"Pardon me, Sir Lorencio."

Glen popped his head inside the tent in Bardloche's camp to find Lorencio hanging his head.

"…Oh, Glen." He only looked up for a moment before letting his gaze lower to the ground. He had been a hearty figure only days before, but he seemed to have aged a few years.

"I've come to report that our forces will prepare to withdraw soon. The injured and poisoned have recovered, so we project they will be able to march."

"……" Lorencio did not respond. He wasn't the only one in this state. All the other faction leaders acted the same way.

Prince Bardloche must be the most disappointed…

No one could have imagined such an outcome, back when they defeated Prince Demetrio's army. Knowing that the throne had been within arm's reach made it sting more.

"Where did we go so wrong that the road forward for Prince Bardloche would be blocked…?" Lorencio shook his head, trying to dispel the nightmare.

But this was his reality. No shakes of the head would make it go away. He knew that, but that was all he could do.

"Glen… If only you had got the youngest prince…"

"……"

Lorencio was right. Things might have been different if Glen had run his sword through Manfred when he had the chance. Or even if Glen had insisted more forcibly to Bardloche that Wein had influenced the citizens to push for a ceremonial baptism.

…Who can say? There's nothing I can do now.

As a member of the faction, Glen felt like he had to yield to his superiors.

But that was the same for Lorencio, too. He realized he was taking his frustrations out on Glen. He checked himself, stopping his verbal assault and lowering his voice.

"…Forgive me. That was foolish."

"Please. Don't even mention it."

There was nothing to be gained for a heart to long for the shadows of a missed future. Everyone knew that, but it was hard to stop it, especially in times like these.

"Hurry with the preparations. For Prince Bardloche and for us, our top priority is returning to the domain and restoring order."

And so Bardloche's disheartened troops trudged home. It was this move that ultimately cemented Bardloche and his faction to their fall from power.

"Are you all right with retreating?"

Back in Manfred's camp…Strang asked the prince as scores of personnel prepared to set out.

"At this rate, Prince Demetrio will become Emperor."

"Seems that way. I mean, obviously, I'm not okay with it. My blood is boiling," Manfred said, shrugging. "But there's nothing I can do. I lost this time. They got me."

"It was my plan that cost us the win. I never expected them to stir a rebellion in our own territory. Please forgive me."

"I was the one who approved the plan, so it's on me," Manfred said. "But are *you* okay with this? Now that I've lost, I can't guarantee independence for your hometown. Demetrio doesn't care about the provinces."

"As long as the new Emperor isn't Bardloche, seeing how he has a track record of mishandling affairs in the provinces. That would be my worst-case scenario. Besides, this incident has gotten Lowellmina to establish ties with Prince Demetrio, so I was planning on using her to get what I need for my hometown."

"Ugh. I hate that you can move on so quickly. It's always guys like you who only care about themselves…" Manfred grumbled in a less-than-princely fashion before picking up on a minor detail. "Past tense? You *were* planning to use her?"

"Though I've only served you for several years, Your Highness, I know you're not the type to give up. I imagine you have some other plan if you were so quick to retreat."

"…I see. You're a sharp one," Manfred noted, nodding in admiration.

“Nothing’s set in stone yet, but a few things have been bothering me.”

“For instance?”

“Lowellmina. I was so sure she wanted to become Empress, but she helped Demetrio out.”

“…Maybe you misread her intentions or she gave up the throne.”

“Or she has *something to turn the tables on us*.” Manfred suddenly smiled. “It’s possible at this point. So we should conserve our energy, right?”

“I see.”

Upon finishing his explanation, Manfred looked at Nalthia in the distance, hosting Demetrio, Lowellmina, and Wein. What in the world were they planning?

“…Whatever it is, I pray it’ll work to my advantage.”

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There were two facilities of holy value in Nalthia.

The first was the mausoleum housing generations of Emperors, but that was located on the outskirts of the city rather than Nalthia proper. It was a massive structure, so keeping it inside would have interfered with the functionality of the city.

The other was the site for the ceremonial baptism. It was said that this was where the spirits of past Emperors watched over the land. The successor to the throne would receive the blessings of their ancestors through a priest before announcing their ascension in front of the citizens in the Imperial Capital.

Stepping into this site was Demetrio and the leaders of his faction.

“So this is what it’s like…”

The ceremonial site contained no lavish ornamentation, but it was lit by flickering flames, giving it a sacred feeling that made anyone correct their posture.

“How are the preparations for the baptism going?” Demetrio asked a subordinate next to him.

“They should be done in the next few days. Prince Bardloche is planning to withdraw.”

“I see… Perfect.” Demetrio’s shoulders trembled. “I will be Emperor… That’s right—me!”

Delight bubbled up in his heart.

He'd put up with daily harassment, scorned for being incompetent. In reality, he came up short compared to his younger brothers and sister. All that others saw was that he was the eldest child of the Emperor. After enduring it all, he would finally rise to the top.

"Good for you, Prince Demetrio."

"I'm so happy for you, brother."

Wein and Lowellmina were calling to him from nearby. Wein had stuck by him to the end, though he was a prince of a foreign nation, and proved himself to be a pillar of support. Lowellmina had deployed the people of her faction to help suppress the rebellion. No one could raise any objections, even if Demetrio let them stand by his side.

Demetrio didn't take any notice of either one, however. For at that very moment, the back of his dearly departed mother flashed before his mind's eye.

Mother…

—You'll make a grand Emperor.

When did he start doubting that his mother loved him?

Was it when he watched her throw away his flower wreath? Or when he noticed his smiling mother had eyes as cold as ice?

These small suspicions had piled up. It made him question himself, pulling him into darkness. He wanted to clear these shadows. He wanted to confirm his mother loved him and respected him, just as he had loved and respected her. But death had taken away his chance.

With this, I'll…

He was going to be a grand Emperor, just like his mother wanted. If he could make the land prosperous, then it would be the same thing as his mother loving the Empire as an Imperial citizen. And that would be the same thing as proof that she had loved him, her child.

I'll finally take the first step…!

Demetrio ventured farther into the ceremonial site.

He stepped forward with confidence that he would inherit the throne. With a sense of accomplishment and duty to become a great Emperor, Demetrio could only express his current feeling as pure euphoria.

"—Stop. I cannot allow the baptism to happen."

Fate was just waiting to push him back down this pinnacle.

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The party started to stir. They all turned toward the entrance behind them.

Standing there with several guards led by Silas was Prime Minister Keskinel.

"…What are you talking about, Keskinel?" Demetrio asked cautiously. "I'm in a good mood right now. If you want to apologize for losing your senses and speaking out of turn now, I'll pretend this didn't happen."

"No need." Keskinel walked toward Demetrio as he repeated himself. "Prince Demetrio, as the prime minister, I cannot allow the ceremonial baptism to take place."

"What are you talking about?!" Demetrio roared. "Gone is the rebellion in my territory! My brothers have returned home! There isn't a single reason why you should be stopping me."

"But there is, Your Highness," Keskinel replied matter-of-factly. "Several days prior, your candidacy for Emperor was questioned."

"You doubt my right to the throne?! On what grounds?!

"You might not be the child of the Emperor." Keskinel's words pierced into him like arrows. "We were recently informed of this possibility."

"_____"

All present were at a loss for words, jaws slack. And who could blame them? They'd known Demetrio as the eldest Imperial prince of the Empire for their entire lives. Of course, they would have trouble wrapping their heads around the idea that he might not be the Emperor's son.

"What…do you think you're saying…?" Demetrio asked, voice trembling. "You think I'm not his child?"

He sounded like he was hoping he'd misheard him, but Keskinel did not backtrack.

"Yes. Until those doubts are cleared, I cannot allow the ceremony to commence."

"……" Demetrio wanted to say something, but found himself unable to. After opening and closing his mouth a few times, rage flashed in his eyes. "…Keskinel! You can't joke about these things!"

His shouting snapped the vassals back to their senses.

"Th-that's right! You can't just go around spouting nonsense!"

“As if! How could the prince not be the Emperor’s son?!”

“Where’s your proof?!”

They protested angrily, but Keskinel remained unfazed, taking their verbal abuse. He carefully took out a single book from his inner breast pocket.

“Look at this.”

“What is that…? A diary?”

“Indeed. It belonged to your deceased mother, the first wife of the Emperor.”

Their eyes all snapped open.

Demetrio’s mother? His faction knew this was a subject that shouldn’t be broached.

“I believe everyone has heard the rumors of how she was displeased and angry at the Empire after her homeland was annexed.”

“Th-those were just rumors!”

“Yes. But looking at this diary…it seems she had really felt that way.” Keskinel casually flipped through the book and opened to a page to show everyone.

Filling the margins was her animosity toward the Empire. They could feel the intensity behind her entry, which took away their breaths.

“And this page. It describes a certain plan. One meant to exact her revenge on the Empire by putting a child of nonroyal blood on the throne.”

“…That’s ridiculous!” Demetrio shouted, prying the diary out of Keskinel’s hands. “You think my mother actually wrote this?! I’ve never seen it before in my… Wait, this is…?!”

The hand holding the notebook trembled.

He had no memory of ever seeing this diary before. He wanted to look away from the vitriol written in it that read like hexes, but the letters were unmistakably in his mother’s hand.

“Th-this handwriting. It can’t be…”

“Impossible… But this is the Empress’s…”

The vassals who peeked at the diary gasped.

Keskinel continued to nail in the coffin. “Upon reevaluating the information in the diary and date of the entry, I have discovered a slight inconsistency between her pregnancy and when she lay with His Majesty. I have verbal testimonies from those who knew her at the time.”

“B-but visible signs of pregnancy don’t look the same for all women!

You can't determine anything from that!"

"Which is why I have questions," Keskinel replied respectfully. "As prime minister, I intend to fully investigate the matter. If this is a baseless accusation, I shall cut off my own head in apology. However, I have no choice but to delay your ascension until then. The vassals must understand that we cannot allow anyone outside the Imperial family to become Emperor."

The ceremonial site was silent once again. They all looked at Demetrio in disbelief. Royal blood was the most basic prerequisite to becoming Emperor. Only after that did the Empire's most powerful leaders choose to support one of the three princes and scheme to put their choice on the throne.

Now that prerequisite had come crashing down. If Demetrio wasn't the Emperor's son, he would never rule the nation.

Even if it was later proved that he was of royal lineage, was it realistic to think he could shake off the other two princes and return again to Nalthia after losing this opportunity?

"This can't be happening…" Demetrio was unstable on his feet. He staggered back two, three steps.

The diary slipped from his hands as his knees buckled under him. He was wiped out on the floor.

They stared at him. No one could move. Well, it was their choice not to move. They just exchanged glances, lost in thought. Should they help him up? Should they offer words of comfort? Should they leave his side, seeing that he might not be worth their support? They were desperate to look out for their own selves.

Someone in the group had a totally different idea in mind.

"Sir Keskinel, I have a question."

It was Wein. He had remained silent so far but now faced the prime minister.

"Ask whatever you wish, Prince Wein."

"Okay, I won't hold back, then… How did you obtain that diary?"

Wein already had a feeling that he knew the answer, and sure enough, Keskinel said exactly what he'd expected to hear.

"—Princess Lowellmina offered it to me."

Everyone turned to look at her. She shrank back, looking shocked to be the center of attention.

"Keskinel is right. I provided him with the diary."

“Wh-why would you do such a thing?!” one of the vassals lashed out.

Lowellmina shook her head. “I came across it by chance. It’s a diary written by someone who has passed, so I intended to never bring it up to anyone. But for the future of the Empire, I realized I must not shirk away from the truth. I, therefore, entrusted it to Keskinel.” Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. “To think it would turn out like this… I am so sorry, Demetrio.”

Of course, her horrible performance suggested otherwise. Everything was a lie.

The only truth in her statement was that she’d stumbled across the diary. And that was technically a half-truth, because she’d come across it when she was looking for the princes’ weaknesses. It was less coincidence than a testament to her persistence.

This was why I couldn’t let Bardloche or Manfred win the battle.

Lowellmina knew she could use the diary as soon as she read it.

It didn’t matter whether the contents were true or not. Either way, it would question Demetrio’s lineage. That was more important than anything else.

If the diary had belonged to Bardloche and Manfred’s mother, it wouldn’t have had the same effect. After all, their factions were made of people who believed in their skills, their character, and the promise of a reward.

That wasn’t the case for Demetrio. His blood was the only thing that kept him in charge. People followed him because he was the eldest son of the Emperor.

And Lowellmina had just shot that down.

Now Demetrio’s faction will come apart. Its members will have nowhere to go. And I’ll snatch them up!

Bardloche and Manfred had gained nothing from this battle. In fact, they were left with piling war costs and rebellion in their respective territories. Neither would have time to deal with anything else. This was the perfect chance for Lowellmina to absorb Demetrio’s faction.

And then, I’ll officially announce that I’m joining the fight for succession!

Until this moment, Lowellmina had publicly pretended to think that one of the brothers would become Emperor. However, this triple failure had made the citizens lose faith in them.

That would be like wind to her sails. Lowellmina would replace her disappointments of brothers and declare her intention to become Empress. It had been all part of her plan to mobilize the patriots to calm the chaos in Demetrio's territory.

I imagine Bardloche and Manfred will fight against this and conspire to push me out of the running. But at the moment, their forces have been substantially weakened. I should be able to handle them myself after I take over Demetrio's faction!

Lowellmina felt a sense of certainty.

I am going to win this battle—!

"I wouldn't be so careless to think that, Lowa."

"What――?"

Clack. Wein took a step forward. In front of him was Demetrio, who hung his head in defeat.

"Wow. Who would have thought this would happen, Demetrio?" Wein said sympathetically as he put his hand on the prince's shoulder. "I can only imagine how you're feeling. I wish I could help, but, well, I wonder what I could even do at this point…"

His gestures seemed rehearsed. He pretended to think. Then, Wein looked over his shoulder at Keskinel behind him.

"Sir Keskinel, you said we would wait until all suspicions were cleared, but you don't intend on confining Prince Demetrio in the meantime, do you?"

"…We will continue to treat him as an Imperial prince until all suspicions are cleared."

"Glad to hear it." Wein turned to Demetrio and grinned. "You must be exhausted from all this mayhem, Prince Demetrio. Would you care to recover in my country for the time being?"

"Prince Wein…"

"Natra is a fantastic little country. We can't do anything about the cold weather, but our economy has never been better, and we're importing new goods from the West. You might find something that you wouldn't be able to in the Empire."

Wein talked to Demetrio as if they had been good friends for a decade. It sounded like he was concerned for him.

Lowellmina knew that wasn't the case. Something else was going on. What was he after? What could he gain by inviting the downtrodden Demetrio to his country?

—*Ah.* It hit her. An instant later, Lowellmina shouted, “Sir Silas!”

She turned around to look at the man standing next to Keskinel. “Secure Demetrio!”

Silas vaulted off the ground and raced straight toward the prince without asking any questions. He stopped halfway.

“Have we made… a fatal mistake?” He looked around him and quietly tsked.

“Sir Silas?!”

“My apologies, Princess Lowellmina… But external forces are already among us.”

“Wha…?!” In a panic, Lowellmina scanned the area.

The ceremonial site was dimly lit. There wasn’t enough light to illuminate the inky corners of the space. However, Silas had sensed something lurking within it.

“We won’t make it in time to reach Prince Demetrio where he stands.”

“…Prince Wein!” Lowellmina yelled. “Please hand over Demetrio!”

“Hand him over? What do you mean?” Wein asked, shrugging and feigning ignorance. “Prince Demetrio is the only one who can make his own decisions. I’m not his keeper. I’m only inviting him to my home country. I’m confused by your threats.”

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“If this were any normal invitation, I wouldn’t be so worried…!” Lowellmina gritted her teeth. She knew Wein was up to something, but she’d never expected him to put a lid on her secret plan.

Well, he didn’t succeed in that regard. Wein couldn’t put a wrench in Lowellmina’s schemes…but he had set his sights beyond that.

“Prince Wein…you’re planning to help Demetrio seek asylum in the West, aren’t you?!”

Lowellmina’s strategy had pushed Wein and Demetrio together. And it was at this point Demetrio had confirmed one thing: He had no chance of winning this battle.

Lowellmina had woven her plot tightly, which all but confirmed her victory. Wein knew he wouldn’t be able to counterattack, considering the disadvantages stacked against him: operating on foreign soil, working within a limited time frame, and dealing with hostile powers.

So he thought outside the box.

In all likelihood, Lowellmina’s goal centered on Demetrio’s baptism. In that case, Wein figured he should set up a plan of his own at the site of this ritual.

For example, something like inviting Demetrio to Natra after he lost to Lowellmina, so Wein could use him as a card to play in the West.

“Y-you want the prince to seek asylum…?!”

The vassals were stunned. Things had shifted so quickly and drastically that they couldn’t keep up.

“Me? Flee to the West…?” Demetrio was apparently still hanging in there, despite the revelation in his mother’s diary. He looked up at Wein with a fire in his eyes.

“—Don’t you get it, Princess Lowellmina?” Wein shook his head. “As I mentioned before, I’m only suggesting the prince take a little vacation.”

“And then you’ll talk him into doing what you want, by telling him that if my brother seeks asylum in the West and that gives them the ‘moral’ grounds to invade the Empire, it’ll open up his path to the throne!”

Demetrio was invaluable to the West. If they backed him up and claimed that the Empire was under the rule of a leader unfit for the throne, it could seriously destabilize Imperial territories.

"I wouldn't dream of it. After all, the Empire and Natra are bound by an alliance. It's impossible for Demetrio to seek asylum in the West," Wein insisted, trying to talk himself out of this sticky situation.

Lowellmina snapped back at him. "Maybe if our two nations still had a volatile relationship. But Natra is slowly inching its borders into the West and working on building cordial relations with surrounding nations. If you gift an Imperial prince to the West and suggest they accept him as their own, your kingdom might be able to join the alliance between the Western nations!"

Of course, executing this had its risks. By tempting Demetrio in this matter, Natra could earn itself the wrath of the Empire, and the Western nations might prey upon their newest member of the alliance—Natra.

However, Wein might be able to pull it off. With Demetrio as the ace up his sleeve, he could have the Empire and the West in the palm of his hand and snatch up everything for himself. He'd done something similar before.

If that happens, I'll be cornered… The Empire will be cornered…!

Lowellmina was confident that she could go against both Bardloche and Manfred once she absorbed Demetrio's faction. If the Western nations butted into their affairs with Demetrio by their side, her calculations would be thrown off, which would be the same as her plan failing. She had to prevent that from happening.

"Demetrio, please come this way. Prince Wein is trying to use you…!"

She had failed to seize Demetrio by force, so Lowellmina's only option was to persuade him to come of his own volition. It hit her that this was their final battle. She was sweating.

"As if you're any better, Princess Lowellmina. Think about this for a minute, Prince Demetrio. Will your wishes come true if you stay in the Empire?"

This was Wein's final battle, too. If he could just appeal to Demetrio and convince him to come to Natra, he would win. If he failed, he would lose.

"Brother! Siding with the West will put the entire Empire in danger! You might have fought for the throne with our other brothers, but you must all have love for our country!"

"They're suspicious of your lineage! And who's to blame for that? None other than Princess Lowellmina herself! Should you trust the woman who caused you to lose everything?"

Wein's and Lowellmina's words sliced through him like knives. Demetrio's fate was suspended between them.

No one else could intervene. They all watched the situation unfold with bated breath. The only one permitted to step in was the one being contested, Demetrio himself.

"……"

…He was staring intensely at the final page of the diary.

I guess I wasn't loved after all…

Of course, it was still conjecture that he wasn't the Emperor's son, but Demetrio had surprised himself. He had accepted it so readily.

His mother's eyes had been cold whenever she'd looked at him. She'd pressured him into becoming Emperor over and over. All those gifts that she threw away.

It was clear that his mother had seen him only as a tool of revenge against the Empire.

I see… That was it, huh…?

Demetrio was the child of a foreign citizen. Few in the palace had any faith in him. His mother gave him a place to belong with her love. But if her love had been a lie…

I really…don't have anything left—

Wein and Lowellmina were bickering over whether Demetrio should stay in the Empire or head West. He had no future in the Empire. His fate would either end in forced retirement or poisoned alcohol.

So what would happen if he joined the West? He imagined he wouldn't become Emperor by turning into their lapdog and defying his homeland. What waited for him was the title of the feudal lord or death.

Either way, he'd never be Emperor. Accepting this fact didn't change anything in Demetrio's heart. He'd already lost the reason to complete his goal. He felt nothing for the throne, the Empire, or his own life.

Maybe I'm better off dead… His mind was crowded with such thoughts.

Just then, he suddenly looked at the fallen diary of his mother.

A notebook of curses. Who would have thought her mild features could house such hatred? He hadn't noticed it, even though he should have been the one closest to her.

Emotions rose to the surface: Shame. Frustration. Remorse. Would the outcome have been any different if he'd paid more attention to her feelings?

He searched for an answer, flipping through the diary. He finally came across the last page.

Demetrio stared at it. His eyes widened.

Written there was a short message devoid of any loathing for the Empire.

—I know he has it in him to make a grand Emperor.

Unlike the rest of the diary, there was no severity, anger, or resentment. It was short, transient—and affectionate.

...I see.

He remembered what Wein had said before: *"Humans rarely have just one motive. For better or worse, our actions can be perceived in many ways. That's why people can just pick and choose the one that suits their needs, as long as they can agree with the outcome."*

Demetrio didn't understand this before. But after reading the diary, it dawned on him.

...I still have a purpose.

His heart soaring, the prince stood up on his own two legs.

"—Prince Wein."

Demetrio's voice came out of nowhere. It cut off Wein and Lowellmina's verbal war. All eyes turned on him as he stood and looked over his shoulder.

"An invite to Natra? Who do you think I am? I'm Demetrio, the First Imperial Prince. I would never set foot in the boonies!"

Lowellmina broke out into a victorious smile, and Wein frowned.

"However! You helped me get this far, even though you're foreign royalty. You may have other motives in mind, but my name would be sullied if I didn't reward your efforts."

Wein looked at him curiously. The smile on Lowellmina's face disappeared. She had a bad feeling about this.

Demetrio turned to her. "Lowellmina, you don't want me to join the West, right?"

"Huh? Y-yes, that's correct." Lowellmina nodded over and over, begging him not to do it.

"Then, I have a condition: You will complete the ceremonial baptism in my place."

"What?" Lowellmina yelped involuntarily.

“Incompetent as I may be, even I know you want to become Empress. Isn’t that right?”

“P-please slow down. Well, yes, it’s true, but if I went through the baptism without laying the groundwork first, I would make enemies and—”

“Uh-huh. Obviously, our stupid brothers would fight you. Some of your patriots who believed in your message that you’re a servant of the people might be enraged when they realize they were pawns for your own goals. But you have to do it anyway.”

Lowellmina was at a loss for words.

Demetrio ignored her. “Mother hoped I would be a great Emperor, but those dreams are dashed.”

His mother had hated the Empire. That was an irrefutable fact. However, Wein said people’s motives were multifaceted. If that was the case, then his mother must have had some love for the Empire and her child. Demetrio was going to chose to believe that was true. He would follow the dreams of his mother, lover of the Empire. That was the only way he could be pious.

“You’ve beaten me. Now, I know you’re the ruler that our Empire needs most… Take my place and become Empress, Lowellmina.”

That hammered the last nail in his political coffin.

Lowellmina and the vassals sank into breathless awe. It didn’t take too long for her to regain her composure.

“…That goes without saying. I shall become Empress,” she answered clearly before timidly adding, “But, erm…might I have some time to gather my thoughts?”

“Why would I grant such a thing to the person who ruined me?”

Lowellmina gave no reply.

Demetrio understood that it would be for the best if she did things her own way to be Empress. But she’d been allowed to run wild until now. Who could blame him for wanting some petty revenge?

“If you need someone to back you up, I have the perfect person in mind.”

“R-really? Who?”

“The one right in front of you.” Demetrio pointed next to Lowellmina: Wein. “Prince Wein, I’d like to reward you, but I’ve lost my land and authority. So I can only present you with the opportunity to wring my sister of everything she’s worth.”

Demetrio couldn’t go to the West, but Wein wasn’t going to stay quiet if he had to leave with nothing, especially after such a long stretch of fighting.

And so the Imperial prince would weaken Lowellmina's position and make it easier for Wein to get ahead. Demetrio was practically begging Wein to work with him here.

As soon as he picked up on this, Wein's shoulder suddenly drooped. "Looks like I got tripped up at the finish line."

"You told me I carried a heavy curse before. You were right, but it was also a message of hope. That little thing let me get the better of you. I won't say this again, so listen closely… Thanks for getting me this far."

"Words of gratitude from an Imperial prince? That's a priceless experience." Wein smiled. "It would be rude of me to ask more of you. As you say, Prince, I'll have Princess Lowellmina pay my debts."

"Yes, please make her life a living nightmare."

"Hold on——!" Lowellmina cried, standing next to the two princes, who had come to an understanding.

Demetrio gave her an easygoing smile before approaching his vassals.

"Y-Your Highness, we…"

"Join Lowellmina. She won't make you regret it."

"But, Your Highness—"

"It's fine… Forgive me for failing to lead you to glory." Demetrio walked briskly past his vassals as they hung their heads, and he approached the prime minister. "Keskinel, I'm forfeiting my claim to the throne."

This signaled the end of Demetrio's political career. If he didn't formally retire, he might be hounded by others trying to use him for their own diplomatic schemes. And more important…

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“I give up my title as an Imperial prince. So…it shouldn’t matter who my parents were.”

He would protect his mother’s reputation.

“…You’re right,” Keskinel said, politely bowing and intending to respect Demetrio’s decision.

Afterward, it was officially announced that Imperial Prince Demetrio had relinquished his claim to the throne. The citizens weren’t given too many details, so they were confused by his motives and annoyed that there was still no Emperor, even after this messy fight.

At the same time, Imperial Princess Lowellmina had announced her own candidacy. The remaining two princes were outraged when she told them that she had no faith in leaving the fate of the Empire in her stupid brothers’ hands and that she had already completed the ceremonial baptism. The citizens themselves had mixed feelings over the idea of the first Empress.

What would become of the Empire? No one knew the answer, but it was clear to all that these events would bring new trouble.

Epilogue

In Willeron Palace in the Kingdom of Natra…

"Aghhhhh, Eliseeeeee…"

…Falanya Elk Arbalest was lying across a desk, longing for the Flahm baby back in the Empire.

"I thought you'd never come home," Nanaki grumbled, recalling the scene.

As they'd prepared to return to Natra, Falanya had refused to stop attending to Elise and let her go. It was like she was bidding farewell to her own life. In the end, Nanaki had to practically drag her back.

"But Elise was so cute! You understand, don't you, Nanaki?!"

"We have officers with children in Natra, too. I'm sure they'll let you play with them."

"It's different! I'm sure they're adorable, but I want to see Elise!" Falanya kicked her feet up, still face-planted on the desk.

Nanaki gave up on any further attempt at constructive conversation. "Anyway, you have a meeting soon."

"Oh, right." Falanya hurriedly straightened her posture. Nanaki assisted her in fixing her appearance.

A knock came from outside the door. "…I've arrived at your request."

A middle-aged man with a small frame appeared before them. His features were rather lifeless, and his demeanor was dry. However, Falanya looked at him and smiled.

"Thank you for coming. I may be inexperienced, but I hope you will support me as my vassal, starting today."

"…I am so thankful to have the opportunity to stand before you, as someone who took refuge in the Empire after I was chased from my homeland. I would want nothing more than to serve you." The man

continued, “There is one thing I wish to ask, Your Highness.”

“Ask away.”

“…Do you not know that I harbor some resentment toward your brother, Prince Wein?”

“I do,” Falanya answered, nodding. “My brother had that coming to him. I imagine you might try to get him to fall—physically and socially—as you serve me.”

“…So why have you chosen me?”

Falanya briefly considered this. “Allow me to ask a question. I believe you’ve heard of what’s happening in the Empire. Do you know what I did for Natra during this incident?”

“Yes… You went to the Imperial Capital in Prince Wein’s stead, met with many of its local leaders, and returned to Natra with several treaties that work in our favor.”

“That’s right. I delivered a message from my brother to Princess Lowellmina, thus hindering her plan. I made several connections with some of the most important people in the Empire.” Falanya had on a look that seemed to mock herself, which didn’t suit her features. “In short, I was a living letter. Even though all the valuable treaties were technically set up by Wein, Princess Lowellmina wants to build me up as another authority figure in Natra, so she can pit me against Wein.”

“If that is what is concerning you, appointing me is not—”

“No. It’s necessary,” Falanya said firmly. “With Natra expanding, my brother can’t be everywhere at once. Even in this instance, I bet I could have served a greater purpose if I were better at handling this stuff. He might have even pushed back on the Empire. But that’s not what happened. Because I lacked experience.”

There was power in Falanya’s voice. Lowellmina called it devilish. The man standing directly before her and even Nanaki trembled a little.

“I admit it. I’m looked down upon. By both foreign nations and even my brother. All because I still have much to learn. Unfortunately, I can’t fix that overnight. I need a capable vassal to support me.”

The man groaned quietly. Should he accept or reject this offer? His decision kept flip-flopping in his heart until he finally reached a simple answer.

“…But that doesn’t change the fact that I pose a threat.”

Falanya offered a small smile. Her lovely lips parted so she could

reminisce on an old memory.

"I once asked my brother, 'What makes a great king?'"

"What makes…a great king?"

"They always talk about it in epics. Even if the ruler is incompetent, they might find that honest and capable vassals are drawn to them. That makes a great king, according to them."

"Did Prince Wein say that it was something else?"

"Yes. My brother asked me this: 'Are you saying there would be no kings if there were no honest and capable people in the world?'"

The man blinked at her, looking surprised. "I guess…he's right."

"People will want things from their king. But a king can't expect things from his people. In the same way, you can't demand integrity from your vassals. That just shows you're an incompetent king. A real ruler isn't just a beacon of hope for the people. They understand and handle the darker side of human nature: self-interest, enmity, corruption, ineptitude, criminality… I was so shocked when I heard that."

Falanya had no way of knowing that Wein had told her this while he was on the lookout for honest and capable people. Natra had still been a small, insignificant nation. He'd made this comment out of frustration—*Who needs talent? I can do this on my own! I definitely don't care that no one wants to come to our little country! I couldn't care less!* But that was a story for another day.

"And that's why you've called upon me?"

"That's right. Just so we're clear, I do need you here. Not just for you to serve as my vassal. I need this to test myself. Am I just a figurehead? Or will I be able to help my brother in some way? I'm trying to see if I can take your poison," Falanya stated.

The man looked at her and squinted as if staring into the sun.

"…Your resolve is admirable, Your Highness." The man's expression burned with a hint of fire. "I do not have much skill, but I shall be your pillar and your poison."

Falanya smiled. "I look forward to working with you—Sir Sirgis."

Before his young and brilliant master, the former prime minister of Delunio bowed.

◆◇◆

“Huh. Falanya hired Sirgis?” Wein said with intrigue as he listened to Ninym’s report in his office. “That’s one heck of a plot twist. Why would Sirgis be in the Empire?”

“After you bested him and he fell from power, his other political crimes came to light, and he was banished from Delunio. After traveling to various countries and failing to find a home in any of them, he secluded himself in the Empire.”

“Aw, that’s sad.”

“I think so, too, Mr. Perpetrator.”

Wein averted his eyes. “Anyway, it looks like he found a good gig with Falanya.”

“It seems your tutor, Claudius, is connected to Sirgis. When Princess Falanya mentioned that she was looking for a vassal, he told her Sirgis’s location in the Empire. When she arrived at the capital, it seems Her Highness went to convince him herself.”

“Wow, real nice of Claudius to introduce her to someone that I share bad blood with.”

Claudius was now Falanya’s tutor, but he used to teach Wein. Unlike him, she was an exemplary student, who must have been much more gratifying to teach.

“So what will you do about Sirgis?”

It was a simple question, but it was asking if he would get rid of him.

Wein had forced him out of his role in his homeland, so it was only reasonable to assume Sirgis harbored some resentment against him. He must have been aiming to use Falanya to get his revenge on Natra.

Wein waved Ninym’s concerns off. “Just leave him alone for now. We’ll respect Falanya and her choices.”

“You’re as easy on Her Highness as ever.”

“Right back at ya. I’ll deal with it if looks like it might pose some problems.”

“So we’ll just surveil her for now.”

With their policy on Sirgis decided, they moved on to the next topic of discussion.

“Now the Empire is convinced that we’ve joined Lowellmina’s faction.”

“Demetrio got me good at the end. Plus, we couldn’t have teamed up with the middle and youngest princes after we made enemies out of them.”

“By the way, how serious were you about presenting Prince Demetrio as

a gift to the West?"

"Fifty-fifty," Wein grumbled. "If we could just keep him in Natra, we might have gotten some stuff from the Empire and the West, even if we didn't say anything about our stance on the matter. In the end, all I got were a few treaties that give us a little boost, which sucks."

"And those were considered the success of Princess Falanya."

"Yeah! Lowa doesn't miss a thing…!"

"It would be no laughing matter if Princess Falanya became involved in the struggle for the throne. I'll keep an even closer watch within the palace, but you have to stay on your toes, too, Wein."

"I got it. At any rate, the Empire will be paralyzed while it's recovering from this mess. Let's just drop it for now." He looked at the letter in front of him. "This is our real problem."

"…An invite to the postponed Gathering of the Chosen."

The Teachings of Levetia was the biggest religion in the West. The Gathering of the Chosen was its annual conference of the Holy Elites. Wein had just received an invitation to the event, which should have been closed to all except the Holy Elites.

"Think it's a trap?" he asked.

"I do."

"What do you think will get us: a demon or a snake?"

"My vote is for something scarier that chases them both away."

"…Suddenly, I don't feel like going!"

"Well, that's another topic you can discuss with the vassals. We have to think it over."

Wein nodded. *No kidding.*

"Sheesh. As soon as I get back from the South, I'm pulled to the East *and* West. I get no rest."

"Isn't that normal for you?"

"I feel like that's something that really shouldn't be normal, Miss Ninym—!"

Ninym ignored him, feigning ignorance.

And thus, First Imperial Prince Demetrio exited stage left from history.

The trouble across the continent was far from over, however, and fiery

trials were waiting to scorch the remaining actors.

Who would be the last one standing? Or would everyone be swallowed by flames and turn to ash?

Only future history books could tell.

Afterword

It's been a while. It's me, Toru Toba.

Thank you for picking up *The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)*, Volume 7.

You might have guessed the theme of this volume was a rematch! The story picks up from Volume 4, featuring the biggest players in the Empire, including Princess Lowellmina, all caught up in their own schemes. I hope you enjoyed watching Wein get knocked down and get back up again.

I've been really thinking about the growing popularity of e-books. I imagine many of you are reading this series on your devices. I've been reading more e-books, too, but I've been thinking about reference books. There aren't too many of them in e-book format, compared to manga and light novels. I like having the physical copy in front of me, so I can flip through to the page that I need…but the biggest issue is the problem with space.

When I think about how a tablet can store up to hundreds, even thousands, of books, it makes me hyperaware of the size of my physical collection… I wonder if we'll have more reference books in e-book form as we keep moving toward digital mediums.

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It’s now time to give my acknowledgments.

To my editor, Ohara, I’m sorry for causing you grief again for missing the deadline. I know I can’t keep doing this, so I want to improve the speed at which I write… I really do…

To the illustrator, Falmaro. Thank you for your beautiful illustrations. I love that the characters seem so lively, of course, and I always marvel at the detail that you put into scenery and props! And that rack! We missed those boobs!

To all my readers, I can’t thank you enough. Your continued support has let me publish more books, even as the world goes through a difficult time. I hope you’ll continue to cheer me on!

The manga adaptation is on the Manga Up! app and illustrated by Emuda. It’s doing really well, and I’m looking forward to working together!

I think the next volume will take us back to the West. We’re starting to get a better picture of all the affairs on this continent. Maybe it’s time for all the Holy Elites to reveal themselves…?

I’m no fortune-teller, but I’m going to work hard to meet your expectations.

Until the next volume!

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